# ANTASTIC UNIVERSE CIENCE FICTION

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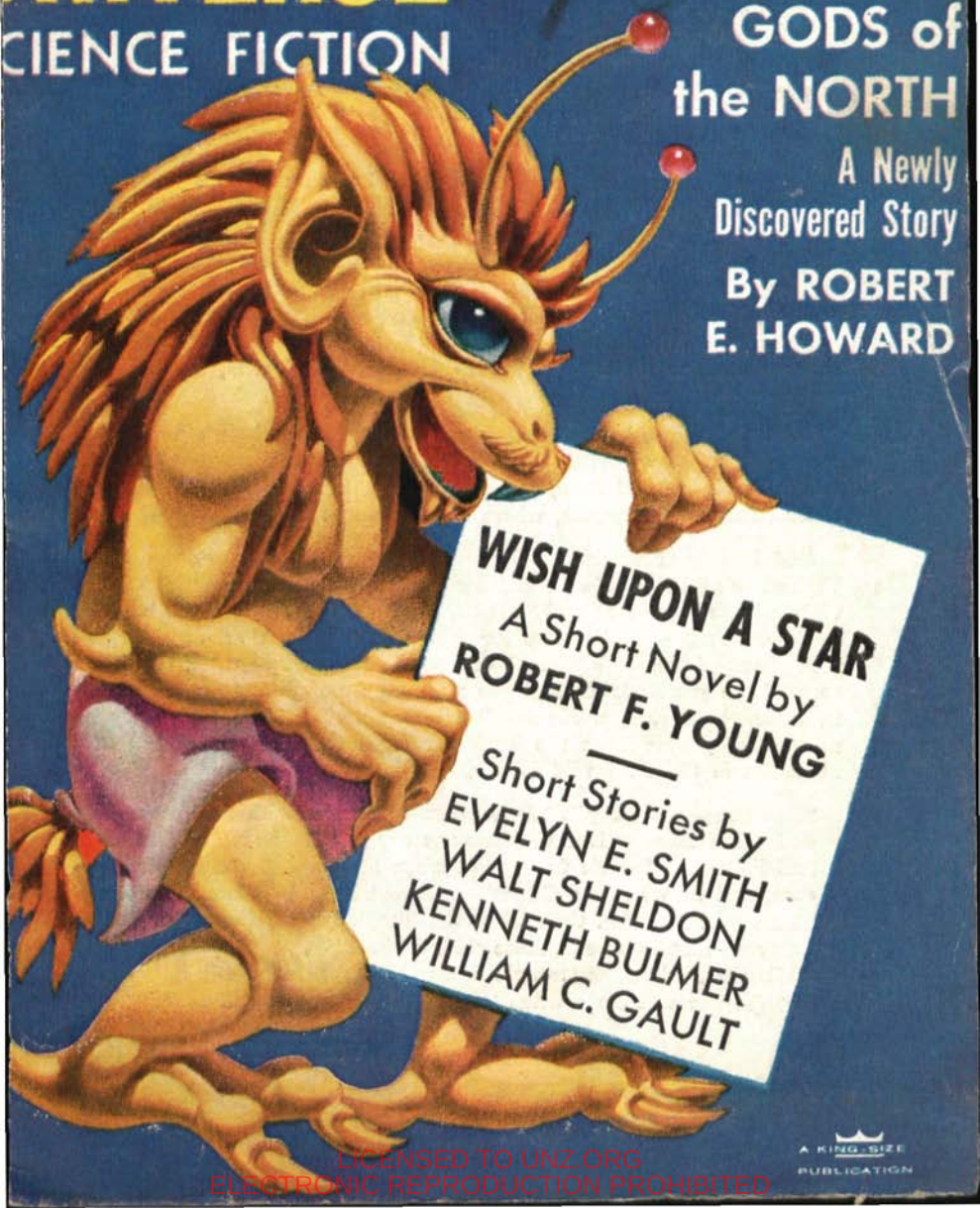
## GODS of the NORTH

A Newly Discovered Story

By ROBERT E. HOWARD



## WISH UPON A STAR

A Short Novel by
**ROBERT F. YOUNG**

Short Stories by
EVELYN E. SMITH
WALT SHELDON
KENNETH BULMER
WILLIAM C. GAULT

A KING-SIZE PUBLICATION

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*THE STORY BEHIND THE COVER—*

There is some dispute amongst scholars about whether the lion on the cover actually *is* a lion, in the strict sense of the word, but it is the closest we can come to describe what the original Venusians, with whom we have so little contact these days, call BIMPILS. Old Venusian legends, taken down on visitape by the early explorers, mention the thought-roars of the Bimpils who appear to have been held in considerable awe by the original inhabitants of the McCampbell Territory.

When it comes down to giffen-tacks, though, we don't really know Venus too well after all. In the old days they used to have all sorts of strange ideas about both climate and life on the planet, weird ideas really when you compare them to reality. In actuality, your problem on much of Venus is very much the same as your problem on Mars—survival on the deserts. True, there are swamps. True, there are fantastic marshes, eternally steaming jungles where strange creatures and even stranger human-like beings are said to live. But who, in their right senses, goes there?

I certainly haven't been that far down South. I've been over to Finchburg several times, that little mining settlement ignoring the desert where Trixie O'Neill lives, and I've been to Storington and Satterlee of course. And to Venusport, where the big liners land.

And I've been up to the hills—twice—the hills where the original Venusians still live. They claim we're too noisy and that we're much too violent in our thoughts and motions, so have withdrawn to the hills. Late in the evenings—what passes for evenings in the hills of Venus—the old men chant of the days when Venus was younger and when the Bimpils roamed the green plains, and you can't help understanding the nostalgia in their shrill chants. Hanno Rock, the distinguished translator of a number of poems from the Tritonian, communicates something of the nostalgia in these cries of a dwindling race—

"The bimpil of bimpils never roars—he talks with his antennae—
and when these quiver the heavens cry out, in anger and in pain,
and lightning flashes from the Aakan hills where bimpils live forever, and we who once did rule this land, we cower in our huts.
There was a golden time when the bimpil ranged the green plains,
today we huddle here in these cold, dakka hills,
while the barbarians trample down the sacred sand-lillies,
but the day will come when the bimpil of bimpils *will* roar!"

VITHALDAS O'QUINN

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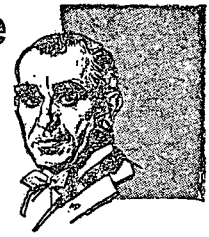

*by Albert Dorne*

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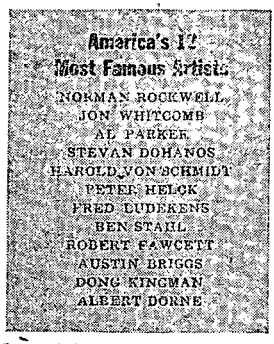


Don Smith lives in New Orleans. Three years ago Don knew nothing about art—even doubted he had talent. Today, he is an illustrator with a leading advertising agency in the South—and has a future as big as he wants to make it.

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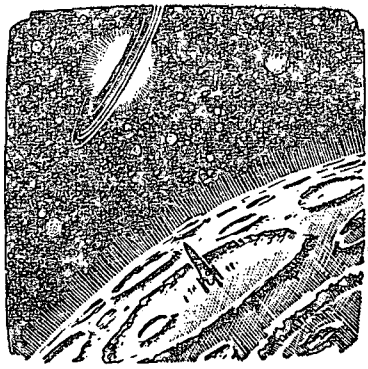

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# wish upon a star

*by ... ROBERT F. YOUNG*

**The first time Alan saw Acktus, former professor of metaphysics, he was lying in a ghetto gutter left there for dead .....**

*...all our intuition is nothing but the representation of phenomena;...the things which we intuite are not in themselves the same as our representations of them in intuition, nor are their relations in themselves so constituted as they appear to us; and... if we take away the subject, or even only the subjective constitution of our senses in general, then not only the nature and relations of objects in space and time, but even space and time themselves disappear....*

—Immanuel Kant, CRITIQUE OF PURE REASON

I WALKED the lower city streets for hours, not knowing I walked at all. It was late afternoon when I reached the ghetto, and the November sky was beginning to lower when I came to the hut which Acktus and I shared.

I couldn't, I wouldn't believe that the picture I had seen beneath the Strip Theatre marquee represented the girl I had been dreaming about for over eight and a half years. I *refused* to be-

*Robert F. Young returns to these pages with a challenging picture of what Tomorrow can be like. The world-wide radioactive fallouts of '65 had done more than prove atomic war was impracticable—they had made warfare of any kind unnecessary. The Western dictatorship that followed in their wake differed so little from the dictatorship of the East that nothing was left to fight for. This new military dictatorship, an offspring of the martial law declared after the fallouts, outlawed all schools and universities. In this world, Alan was to meet Diane....*



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lieve that my goddess of the void was really nothing more than an aristo-militarist's mistress, a sordid bubble walker exhibiting her body on the ramp for the ego-gratification of her owner.

Acktus seemed to sense my mood when I entered the hut. But his grotesque face remained impassive, and he asked no questions. He merely got up from his chair by the table, lit the lantern suspended from the corrugated iron roof, and then sat down again. I removed my ragged coat and sat down at the other side of the table.

I told him about the picture. The long walk had aggravated my bad leg and the new pain blended with the agony of my thoughts. When I finished, Acktus showed no surprise. He showed no sympathy either. He merely said: "You should be happy now, Alan. Now you *know* that your 'Dream' girl is real."

I shook my head. "I saw her picture," I said. "Not *her*. And it was a cheesecake poster, not a photograph. I simply can't accept it as evidence of her reality."

"You can't because you don't want to. You idealized this girl; you endowed her with all the qualities you want to find in a woman. And now that you think she has failed to live up to your idealization of her, now that you suspect that she cannot possibly possess any of the qualities that you forced on her, you are unable to accept her. But I'm afraid you're going to have to, Alan. Logically she couldn't be anything else than what she is, and we should have guessed long ago that if she existed in this reality at all, she had to exist as the bubble walker-mistress of an aristo-militarist."

The yellow light of the lantern illuminated only the prominent features of the face across the table from me. The eyes were shadowed by the tufted cornices of eyebrows, the cheeks eclipsed by the protruding ledges of cheekbones. It was a neanderthalic rather than a noble face just as the shoulders below it were anthropoid rather than human; yet Acktus was the most brilliant metaphysician of his era—a twenty-first century Kant, sans Koenigsberg and sans publisher.

Presently he said: "Tell me the Dream again, Alan."

"At first it was little more than a sensation of nothingness combined with an awareness of extreme velocity," I began. "That was over eight and a half years ago...."

I had repeated the words so many times that I knew them by heart. The enervated words, the silly stick-words that collapsed to the ground when you tried to build with them; words too lackadaisical to convey the horror and the beauty and the poignancy of the reality I knew by night and tried to forget by day.

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I must have experienced the initial phase of the Dream for almost a year before I realized that my eyes—in the dream-reality—w e r e closed. But even when I opened them I had only partial vision. I could see two vague human figures, one close beside me, the other some distance away and presumably facing me. Then I found that by concentrating I could make out one of the figures.

The process took weeks and innumerable D r e a m s, but at last I learned that my nearer companion was a beautiful girl, clad in a blue coat and a white dress, whom I had never seen before.

Her eyes were closed and she did not open them for a long time. When she did open them she stared at me for a long time—Dream after Dream after Dream—and I guessed that she was concentrating on me the way I had concentrated on her. When she finally saw me she seemed puzzled, and it was clear that she didn't know me any more than I knew her; that she had never seen me before.

All of us seemed to be adrift in a grayish nothingness. There was no light, no darkness. Except for the distance separating our bodies, there was no space. Yet, despite the absence of light, I could see, and despite the spacelessness, I had an awareness of motion, a conviction that I was traveling at extreme velocity form one point to another point.

It was nearly a year after I first "opened my eyes" that I began to see the third figure. Its chest was narrow, its limbs long and straight. Its clothing was that of an aristo-militarist, and as more and more details came into focus, I saw that the breast of the gray, form-fitting coat was spattered with blood.

The face appeared to me as a reddish blur at first, then resolved into a pulpy mass interspersed with flecks of gray. Even then the full horror of the situation did not occur to me, and it was not till I saw the absence of forehead, eyes, nose, mouth and chin that I realized that this was not a face at all, but what had remained after the face had been torn away.

The girl seemed to realize at about the same time I did that our Dream companion had no face, because her own face turned white, her body became rigid, and her lips parted in a soundless scream. Her eyes became glazed, and it was many Dreams later before t h e y cleared again. When they did clear they focused on me, and neither of us had ever looked at our grisly companion again.

Although we had tried to communicate many times, the Dream was soundless and our communication was limited to the reading of each other's lips. But I had never been able to grasp anything but the

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simplest of monosyllabic words, and the girl's receptivity seemed to be no better.

But the lack of sound was only a minor anomaly. The Dream differed from ordinary dreams in much more striking ways. It was continous throughout sleep—if I could trust my own judgment—and it occurred every time I fell asleep, even if I dropped off only for a moment. And while it had continually evolved as to detail, becoming more and more vivid through the years, its basic structure had never altered.

Recently I had become aware of a growing change in myself—my dream-self. Perhaps this change had begun long before; perhaps it had had its beginning in the first occurrence of the Dream. I did not know. I only knew that in the Dream-reality my bad leg was healing, that it had almost become a normal limb. And recently I had become aware of another change in myself—my real self. I had had an increasing sense of turned around realities; a growing conviction that my existence in the Dream was my true existence, and that my existence in the decadent world which the aristo-militarists had created was the Dream....

The hut was unheated, but I could feel cold sweat on my forehead and I raised my hand and wiped it away. Outside, a wind had sprung up in the ghetto streets and I could hear the restless rustling sound of scuttering leaves.

I looked across the table at Acktus, hoping that my telling him the Dream for perhaps the hundredth and one time had evoked the insight he had been waiting for. If it had, his cliff-like face gave no sign.

"You still don't know, do you," I said.

A smile touched his ugly lips. "I am a little like you, Alan," he said. "You know that the picture you saw beneath the marquee this afternoon is unquestionably a representation of the girl you've been dreaming about for all these years. But you do not want your 'Dream' girl to be a bubble walker, therefore you reject the knowledge. And I know that your Dream is directly related to my work in ontology, but I will not accept the knowledge because it conflicts with my preconceived theories. Instead I reject it, and I will go on rejecting it until the relationship becomes so evident that I can reject it no longer."

"But what *is* the relationship?"

"For the moment it isn't necessary that you should know. It is more important, first, that you assimilate your unwanted knowledge. When you have done so, return here and I will make an attempt to assimilate mine. If both of us succeed, I will be in a better position to impart the nature of the relationship, and you

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will be in a better position to receive it."

"In other words, you want me to go to the Strip Theatre and watch this girl go through her routine."

Acktus nodded. "There's no other way for you to see her, and you've got to establish in your own mind whether she is or is not the girl in the Dream." He raised his arm, glanced at the ring-watch on his hirsute forefinger. "1930 hours," he said. "If you hurry you can catch the whole performance."

## II

IT WAS LATE in November and the wind was raw, but the old civilslave woman standing beneath the marquee was selling violets just the same. However, they were paper violets, no more incongruous in the lower city than the ratio of troops to civilslaves, or the popularity of an entertainment the essence of which was frustration.

I paused before the picture, reluctant to enter the theatre. The mixed crowd of the lower city flowed round me like a polluted river. Above my head the lewd red lettering on the marquee spelled out THE GODDESS DIANE. The lettering was repeated, without benefit of neon, at the base of the picture.

It was a life-size picture, the theatre artist's three dimensional conception of the featured bubble walker—or strip goddess, to employ the more euphemistic term. There was a hint of poetry in the lithe long legs and graceful hips, in the burgeoning of half concealed breasts and the flowering of white shoulders. And the face—

The emotion I had experienced that afternoon, when I had first seen the picture, returned. My chest tightened and I heard the loud silent pounding of my heart. The face was hard and sophisticated, not soft and compassionate the way I was used to seeing it in the Dream. But the hair was the same, a soft dark brown, and the wide apart eyes were the same too, a June sky blue. And while the sensitive mouth was shaped into a brazen smile, there was a hint of tenderness still lingering on the lips, and an intimation of girlish dimples still clung to the painted cheeks.

She had to be the same girl. It was futile to deny it any longer. And the Strip Theatre, as Acktus had implied, was the logical place for her to be. Like all beautiful women, she had been appropriated by an aristo-militarist and now was being exhibited on the ramp for the ego-gratification of her owner.

But, try as I would, I still couldn't accept the knowledge. For years the girl in the Dream had been a shining symbol of everything civilization had lost, my solitary

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touchstone with idealism. I wanted her to remain that way.

I entered the theatre and found a seat in the pit. It was a rear seat but quite close to the outermost curve of the crystalline ramp. Above me the loges formed a lofty semi-circle, and glancing up I saw the aristo-militarists reclining in their anachronistic chaise lounges, sipping rare wine from thin-stemmed glasses. Jeweled scabbards blazed in the radiance of antique chandeliers; telescopic monocles twinkled. Jaded faces were flushed with anticipation.

I knew the real reason for that anticipation. An aristo-militarist exhibiting his mistress before his men might at first seem to be an exaggerated throwback to the pseudo-democracy of the Pre-Fallout army. Actually it was nothing of the sort. He exhibited his mistress solely for the benefit of his ego: his men, and the civilslaves who shared the pit with his men, could see and desire her, but only he could *have* her.

Just before the theatre lights dimmed, I saw Desteil, the Commanding Officer of the city. His loge was almost directly above me and I had to crane my neck to see his decadent face. I had always made a practice, whenever I glimpsed him in a crowd, to look into his eyes and tell him as well as I could, without benefit of words, exactly what I thought of him and the system that had spawned him.

I had desecrated him with a glance many times. I desecrated him now. But if he was aware of my existence, his pale blue eyes did not betray the fact, and presently the lights dimmed and I turned my attention to the stage.

The curtains parted, and a blue light-bubble formed upon the dark stage, revealing the chorus. When the first strains of the *Libido* overture emanated from the loud speakers, they began their mincing walk around the ramp.

The light-bubble accompanied them, bathing their half-naked bodies in indigo mist. They were beautiful girls, the property of the lower ranking aristo-militarists, but carefully culled from the cities, the collective farms and the ghettos. I could feel the soundless sigh that rippled through the pit as the enlisted men and the civilslaves hopelessly contemplated the unattainable.

After the bubble-walk of the chorus the first strip goddess appeared. She wore the usual sequence of gossamer scarfs and each time she removed one she tossed it contemptuously into the pit for the enlisted men and civilslaves to fight over. The procedure was timed so

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that the removal of the final scarf coincided with her return to the stage and the closing of the curtains.

But even before she left the stage I knew that she wasn't the goddess Diane.

The next girl wasn't Diane either, or the next. The featured bubble walker usually came on last. I sat through a monotonous series of colored lights and mincing walks, my bitterness mounting. I wanted to get up and leave, I wanted to retain what little remained of my idealism. But I did not move from my seat. I had to know, regardless of the disillusionment the knowledge might contain, whether the girl in the picture was really the girl in the Dream.

Presently there came a pause in the performance. Then a series of crashing elevenths ushered in the final movement of the *Libido* and the curtains parted, revealing a goldn girl standing in a mist of purest golden light.

I knew then that the goddess Diane and the girl in th Dream were one and the same girl.

She started around the ramp. She walked slowly, not mincingly the way the others had walked, but sedately and with grace. She removed the first scarf and it floated from her fingers like a pale moth.

I watched her approach, drinking in the reality of her; the taste was not bitter as I had thought it would be, but sweet and intoxicating, for there was a dignity about her that raised her high above her tawdry surroundings, that isolated her from the way of life that had been forced upon her.

When she reached the outermost curve of the ramp she paused a moment, freed another gossamer scarf and tossed it into the pit. As she did so, her eyes touched mine.

The theatre artist, I saw then was responsible for the sophistication of the face in the picture. Certainly there was no sophistication in the face swimming above me in the gold mist of the light-bubble. This face was soft and compassionate the way I knew it in the Dream, with no brazen smile deforming the tender lips or conflicting with the summer blue of the eyes.

Now, meeting mine, those eyes went wide, first with shock, then with disbelief. Abruptly she lowered them and a blush darkened the gold of her neck, rose like a flame to her cheeks. She turned then, and resumed her walk. But the slowness was gone from her gait, and although the audience screamed for new vistas of her flesh she did not re-

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move a single scarf, and presently the curtains hid her from view.

Somehow I got out of the pit and into the street. I lingered beneath the marquee. The performance was over and enlisted men and civil-slaves jostled against me as they mushroomed out of the theatre. The wind had turned colder and wild flakes of snow were sifting down through the lacy walks of the upper city.

She recognized me, I thought. She *knew* me.

The inference was staggering: *she too was experiencing the Dream.*

But why had she been ashamed? I thought I knew the answer: she didn't care what the faceless crowd in the pit thought of her, or what the perverted creatures in the loges thought of her; but she did care what I thought of her because she wanted my respect.

It was even possible that my presence in the Dream was as reassuring to her as hers was to me, that she needed me the way I desperately needed her.

Suddenly I knew I had to see her, that I had to touch her face, her hair; that I had to talk to her about the Dream. Shortly, I knew, she and the aristo-militarist who owned her would be departing from the theatre roof. The chance of my contacting her there was remote, but it was the only chance I had.

I reentered the theatre and made my way along the corridor bordering the pit. The cold had set my bad leg to throbbing and I was limping when I came to the lifts.

The lifts dated back to the time when the city was rebuilt into an architectural symbol of the army caste system. A degree of equality still existed between civilians and officers at that time, and civilians were allowed the freedom of the upper, or officer's, city. However, when the military dictatorship reduced the status of civilians to the level of enlisted men, that freedom was canceled and the lifts fell into disuse. I hoped to find one that still functioned, for there was no other way for me to gain the roof.

I was in luck. The third set of controls that I tried responded with alacrity, and a moment later I stepped out into the snow-flecked wind of the upper city. I found a shadowed corner on the theatre roof and I stood in the wind, waiting.

Above me fliers hovered, their lights dimmed by the wet clinging snow. To my right were the loge lifts, and each time an aristo-militarist and his mistress emerged, one of the fliers descended and picked them up. I kept hoping that Diane had not yet departed, even though I realized now that there would be no chance to contact her. But at least I could find out who her owner was, bitter though

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the knowledge was sure to be; and the identity of her owner would give me some idea of where to find her, hopeless though the information was sure to be.

Abruptly the absurdity of my reasoning overcame me and I saw my position in its true perspective. I, a nondescript civilslave, aspiring to meet an aristo-militarist's mistress! The wind laughed as it leaped the cornice behind me and made a mockery of my ragged clothes; my atrophied leg throbbed with new pain. At that very moment Diane emerged from the nearest lift on the arm of a resplendent officer.

The laughter of the wind climbed a wild crescendo when I recognized her owner. I should have known that the most beautiful woman on the ramp would belong to the highest ranking officer in the loges. I should have known that Diane could belong to no one but Desteil.

They passed me very close as I stood there in the shadows, and a flier, larger and more luxurious than the rest, came down to receive them. Desteil's thin pointed face was flushed with possessive pride, and I could have murdered him happily with my bare hands. But the thought of the photon guns in the belts of the roof guards held me back and I watched numbly while Diane, in mink and diamonds now, climbed into the bright interior of the flier, followed by her lover, and then I watched the flier purr aloft into the night until the slanting snow and the indifferent darkness hid it from view.

After a while I slipped back through the shadows to the lift that had brought me to the roof. Once in the lower city I headed for the ghetto. The ghetto—and Acktus.

## III

THE WORLD-WIDE radioactive fallouts of 1965 did more than prove that atomic war was impracticable: they made warfare of any kind unnecessary. The Western dictatorship that followed in their wake differed so little from the dictatorship of the East that nothing was left to fight for.

The new dictatorship was a military one, an offspring of the martial law which was declared after the fallouts. When all danger from the fallouts had passed, it established itself permanently by depositing a thermo-nuclear bomb on Washington D.C. at a time when Congress was in session and the President was in residence at the White House.

After two judicious assassinations in their own ranks the aristo-militarists, as they now began calling themselves, stated that henceforth both the navy and the air force would be considered subsidiary branches of the army. The draft was expanded into a

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gargantuan entity that devoured every physically fit citizen past the age of 16. Industries were turned into military institutions replete with private-laborers, sergeant-foremen, and officer-superintendents. Physically unfit civilians were put to work on collective farms under the supervision of the nearest city C.O. or allowed to run small businesses in the cities.

These small businesses, however, proved to be liabilities when the aristo-militarists lowered the civilians' status to that of the enslaved enlisted men. The average enlisted man's values had not improved with the new scheme of things, and the civilians discovered that the price for their remaining in the cities involved their self-respect, the rape of their daughters, and the destruction of their property. The outlying collections of haphazard huts characteristic of all military metropolises were the result.

By 2030 there were still a few schools and universities left. Acktus was a doctor of metaphysics in one of the latter. Then, with typical suddenness, the aristo-militarists decided they didn't like the idea of educated cripples—by that time the halls of ivy had no other occupants—and the military boot came down with numbing force. All schools and universities were outlawed, and their personnel persecuted.

The first time I saw Acktus, he was lying in a ghetto gutter, left there for dead by Desteil's M.P.'s. I found the flutter of a pulse in the huge wrist and I managed to drag the prodigious body to my hut. It was late at night and I had to get the ghetto doctor out of bed. The neanderhalic head and the ape-like torso were raw from the systematic beating inflicted by the M.P.'s, but after treating the wounds, the doctor assured me that the man would live.

Acktus healed quickly. In a matter of days strength flowed back into his long arms and short thick legs. By the end of a week he was able to hobble about the three rooms of the hut without my assistance. He told me what I had already guessed: that he was one of the few descendants of the victims of the fallouts—a third generation mutant—and that he had been on the staff of one of the last of the universities to feel the brunt of the military boot.

Next he expounded his theory of ontology....

Even though ghetto dwellers were forced to maim their children in order to keep them out of the eternal draft, they continued to beget them because children, under almost any circumstances, supply not only a reason but a justification for living. Third generation mutants however, were invariably sterile and had to find other ways to rationalize their lives. Philoso-

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phy was one such way, and it was a natural step from philosophy to metaphysics; and if you were a mutant desperately in need of a better world, your next and final step brought you to ontology.

Ontology—the study of reality itself—was Acktus' *raison d'etre*.

I found him waiting up for me. He was sitting at the table staring down at his hands. He took one look at my face and said: "Was it as bad as that, Alan?"

"She's Desteil's mistress," I said.

He returned his eyes to his hands. A shudder shook his massive frame. "So," he said. "Desteil."

Abruptly he stood up. "You have assimilated your unwanted knowledge, Alan. Now it is my turn." He took the lantern and, motioning me to follow, moved ponderously into the adjoining room. It was the room which he jokingly referred to as his "laboratory". It was here that he carried on his work in ontology, and the essence of ontology, according to his definition, was its independence from mechanical equipment. Consequently the only "apparatus" in the "laboratory" were bookshelves spacious enough to hold his voluminous notebooks, a couch sturdy enough to support his weight, and a small table.

There was a newly drawn star map spread out upon the table. It was done in full color and it was flawlessly executed. There was a binary consisting of a magnificent blue-white star and a tiny white dwarf. Spread out around them in various orbital positions were nineteen planets—hardly more than tiny specks, but each painstakingly colored to signify its predominant flora or absence thereof.

Acktus set the lantern on a nearby shelf, then leaned over the table like a hairy god contemplating his latest creation; an ape-god surveying his blueprint for a new reality.

Presently he raised his eyes to mine. "I will review my theory briefly," he said.

"The mind creates subjective reality in cooperation with other minds. No two individual subjective realities are precisely similar because no two minds are precisely alike, but a general conformity exists except in cases where the circumstances of an individual's life have made it imperative for him to create an additional subjective reality—a schizo-reality, if you like. But the prefix 'schizo' betrays the inadequacy of the reality so created: it is not complete enough to supersede the reality from which the schizophrene wishes to escape and consequently he can effect only partial escape and is forced to live in two realities.

"We can compare subjec-

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tive reality to a force field of ideas generated by the human race; a mass-reality or, to expand on the Berkeleyan conception, a mass-*esse est percipi*—'to exist means to be perceived as an idea' by the whole of humanity.

"Although we cannot conceive of the objective universe, we must nevertheless concede its existence, and admit that the reality in which we are involved consists not only of our subjective force field of ideas but of the underlying thing-in-itself as well. We are unable to perceive the true nature of the latter because of the *a priori* factor of our intuition. As Kant said, 'In respect to the form of phenomena, much may be said *a priori*, while of the thing-in-itself, which may lie at the foundation of these phenomena, it is impossible to say anything.'

"Consider the table between us. Neither of us can conceive of it without locating it in space and connecting it with a moment in time. Yet the table, and all other aspects of the thing-in-itself, is both spaceless and timeless. Our *a priori* factor imposes both elements.

"Conversely, neither of us can conceive of space and time abstracted from objects or events. If you doubt this, close your eyes and concentrate on pure space and pure time. You will find that you cannot visualize either of them, and this alone proves that they are not a part of the thing-in-itself but mental elements which we ourselves supply.

"It follows, then, that if we could free our minds even temporarily from this *a priori* factor, the thing-in-itself would be revealed to us. And while we could not move from one point to another point by employing ordinary methods, since both space and time would be absent, we *might* be able to move from one point to another point by employing an entirely different method—*by altering our individual subjective realities.*

"In other words, if we could create an individual subjective reality strong enough to supersede the mass force field of ideas, we could move from one subjective point to another subjective point; from one subjective world to another subjective world, or from one subjective solar system to another subjective solar system. And if we could make this new reality powerful enough we could take others—perhaps the whole of humanity—with us.

"Specifically, if I can free my mind from the *a priori* factor and at the same time conceive of a subjective reality on Sirius 9 stronger than our present subjective reality on Earth, we will immediately materialize in the new reality, thereby attaining instantaneous teleportation without recourse to such naive devices as matter trans-

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mitters or any of the other transmission machines which are militaristic scientists have conceived of but have never been able to build.

"You are about to raise the objection that perhaps there is no ninth planet in the Sirius system, that for all we know there may be no planetary system at all. May I remind you that we are dealing with subjective reality, and as far as subjective reality is concerned anything that seems to be real *is* real. There is no other criterion. For example, for all we know there is no third planet of the star Sol, or Sol for that matter; yet for all practical purposes we are perfectly content to accept the reality of the ground on which we stand, the air we breathe, and the phenomena we perceive.

"Actually there is only one requirement in the creation of an alternative subjective reality of this kind: it must seem to be more real than the mass subjective reality in which we are involved and which we want to leave. It must be carefully and exhaustively fabricated; it must be replete down to the smallest detail; because if it is lacking in any respect in which the mass force field of ideas is not lacking, movement through the thing-in-itself will be impossible even with the *a priori* factor removed.

"The map here on the table roughly represents my conception of the Sirius system. It facilitates my thinking, but it is by no means indispensable."

He indicated the notebook-laden shelves covering all four walls of the room. "There lies the true essence of my alternative reality: the duplications and the variations of all the phenomena, both past and present, of the mass force field of ideas in which we are imprisoned."

Acktus returned his eyes to the map. "Of the nineteen planets, only one need concern us now—the ninth. It is a primitive planet replete with mountains and forests and lakes and seas. A river-veined wilderness, a—"

"But why a wilderness," I interrupted. "Why not at least a semblance of a civilization? A city or two; towns—"

"Why not, indeed." A smile lightened the line of the neanderthalic lips and it was as though a ray of sunlight had fallen on the massive face. "Humanity needs another chance, Alan; it needs forests, not cities, to live in—Waldens, not New Yorks. It needs blue skies to walk beneath, and winding rivers to follow down to pleasant seas."

"Humanity will never change," I said. "There have been blue skies since the time of Eoanthropus, and Cro-magnon had many a winding river to follow down to many a pleasant sea."

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The smile softened. "Cynicism does not become you, Alan. It does not become you because you are not a cynic. You are a frustrated idealist. You have been bitter for years because your parents mutilated your leg to keep you out of the draft, yet at the same time you admire them for their courage in performing the act, and you despise the militaristic system for indirectly bringing about their death through prolonged malnutrition. And you are bitter now because the girl in the Dream has turned out to be Desteil's mistress, yet in your heart you still idealize her. But enough—"

The smile faded away and he returned his attention to the map. One huge hand moved out over the two-dimensional planets and poised high above the tabletop ecliptic. "The blue star is, as you probably know, Sirius," he said. "The cindery speck you see some distance to the left is Sirius' dwarf companion. As I said, of the nineteen planets, only one need concern us now." The hand descended like a great but gentle bird and a forefinger touched the green dot of Sirius 9. "Here, somewhere beneath the thousands of square miles of my fingertip, is a green hill. Below the hill, in an idyllic valley, a blue river winds, fledged by the new growth of trees. There are vineyards and orchards and meadows; flowers and green grass. It is a beautiful valley, as beautiful as I could make it. Subjectively, it is approximately 8.65 light years distant from the minute area of Earth we are inhabiting at this moment.

"Now I will concentrate, and afterwards I want you to tell me what you experienced."

The eyebrow-cornices of the cliff-face seemed to lower; the sunken eyes darkened above the twin ledges of the cheekbones. Lines, like fissures, rivened the gaunt precipice.

At first I experienced nothing. The familiar room, with its notebook lined shelves, remained the same; the tabletop planets moved imperceptibly on their little journeys around their tabletop binary; Acktus stood immobile, his forefinger still touching the green dot of Sirius 9. And then, subtly, nothing became nothingness, and the gray spaceless lightless waste of the Dream closed in around me. Beside me, more vividly beautiful than ever, Diane drifted, and hovering before us, more grisly than ever, was the apparition with blood and gray matter for a face....

I must have fallen, for suddenly I saw Acktus' pale face swimming above me and felt the pressure of his arm beneath my shoulders. "Quickly, Alan," he said, helping me to my feet. "Tell me!"

When I told him I saw the pain come into his eyes and

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the pain was so intense that I had to turn away. "I cannot deny the relationship any longer," I heard him say. "The Dream and my experiment are one and the same thing. But I cannot explain yet. I must think. I must try to adjust myself to the unwanted knowledge. I am an old man and I so much wanted to leave Earth...."

IV

I WENT OUT into the somber November evening. The day, like all ghetto days, had been bitter and depressing, and my stand in the market place had yielded its usual pittance. At supper Acktus had explained—reluctantly, it seemed—what I had to do in order to contact Diane. Then he had lapsed into a gloomy silence.

Last night's snow was a damp memory on the lower city streets, but the wind was still running raw and fierce. In the sky dark tatterdemalion clouds brushed the embroidery of the upper city walks. I reached the Strip Theatre long before the line began to form and I waited shivering in the wind till the doors opened. Then, following Acktus' advice, I obtained a seat at the edge of the ramp in the vicinity of the seat I had occupied the night before.

I sat there impatiently while the pit and the loges filled. The aristo-militarists settled back in their chaise lounges like perverted gods preparing for a psychopathic feast. Diamond-studded scabbards danced in the light of chandelier-suns; polished boots gleamed. Once again I glimpsed Desteil in the loge just above me, and this time I could hardly contain my hatred. Everything I deplored seemed to be epitomized in the tall wiry body and the thin hungry face; in the pitiless blue eyes. This time when I sought those eyes they returned my gaze. There seemed to be mockery in them, and cold amusement, but I could not be sure, for at that point the theatre lights dimmed. I turned my attention to the stage just as the first strains of the *Libido* sounded.

The bubble-walks paralleled those of the night before. I brooded through them, thinking over and over of a Tennysonian passage which my memory had dredged up during the day—

*He will hold thee, when*
*his passion shall have*
*spent its novel force,*
*Something better than his*
*dog, a little dearer than*
*his horse.*

In my bitterness, both time and place faded, and I was startled when the elevenths climbed their weird mountain of harmonious dissonance. Softly, lewdly the strains of the final *Libido* movement sounded in the valley below—

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And then my bitterness blew away. Once again Diane was moving slowly out upon the ramp, a Diane all soft and golden; a vivid living statue of Grecian symmetry and grace. The first scarf drifted palely into the pit. The second—

I could hardly breathe when she neared the outermost curve of the ramp. Had Acktus been right in his reasoning? Would she do the one and only thing she could do in order to contact me? Closer and closer she came, a goddess of pink-gold flesh, a lovely Aurora with sun mist in her hair.

She was standing just above me now. She had removed a blue scarf and she was holding it in one hand. There was a tenseness about her, and her eyes were afraid. When they touched mine, relief filled them, and she tossed the scarf straight into my waiting hands.

I fought my way free from the other hands around me, ducked and turned and twisted, and finally gained the street. I stuffed the scarf into the inside pocket of my coat and hurried toward the nearest enlisted men's cafe. Inside, I carried my drink to a secluded booth, took out the scarf and examined it.

At first I could find nothing unusual about it. It seemed to be an ordinary bubble walker's scarf, thin to the point of translucence, but unremarkable otherwise. And then, in one of the corners, I noticed that a tiny clock had been stitched into the material. It was an ancient clock, and its hands pointed to 12:00. Above the numeral was the tiny letter "M".

Midnight. That was *when* I was supposed to meet her.

But *where* was I supposed to meet her?

I went over every square inch of the material searching for another symbol. I found nothing. Suddenly I had the impression that someone was watching me and I glanced over at the semi-circular bar. One of the enlisted men was standing at an angle that gave him a good view of the interior of the booth where I was sitting. He was staring at the backbar now, but I knew that a moment ago he had been staring at me.

I stuffed Diane's scarf into my inside pocket again. I finished my drink, then I got up and walked as casually as I could to the door. But the man did not even turn his head, and I stepped unmolested into the street.

I started walking. The first chrono-streetlight said 2247 hours. I had one hour and thirteen minutes to figure out where I was supposed to meet Diane. Not even that if I deducted the time it would take me to get to wherever I had to go.

I passed the PX district, the enlisted men's and the enlisted women's barracks and the apartment barracks for

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married personnel. When I came to the lower city military academy I turned and retraced my steps. The streets were filled with troops returning from the cafes and it was impossible for me to tell whether I was being followed or not.

I glanced at each chrono-streetlight I passed. 2310 hours. 2321 hours. 2340 hours. I jammed my wind-numbed hands deeper into my coat pockets, desperately trying to think.

Angrily I wondered why she had been so cryptic. But my anger was unjustified. She had had to be cryptic in the event that her message fell into the wrong hands. The replica of an ancient clock would be meaningless to the majority of enlisted men. They would take it for a senseless design which the manufacturer had stitched into the material. A civilslave, however, would recognize it for what it was, for civilslaves had intellectual ties with the past and a number of them, myself included, still visited the Pre-Fallout museum where such archaic timepieces could still be found.

The only place where they could still be found—

## V

I MADE my way through the jungle of the grounds, following the grass-ruptured walk. Presently the dark mass of the building became visible against the cloud-torn sky. Just before me was the once ornate entrance, now little more than a gaping hole flanked by crumbling pillars. I wondered how I would ever find Diane in the dark empty corridors and the vast silent rooms, and then the ragged clouds parted and a gibbous moon shone through; and I saw the silvery figure standing on the steps, and I heard the indrawn breath.

The moonlight had betrayed me too and I walked numbly through the pale whiteness of it to the steps, and up the steps to where she stood, a goddess no longer gold, but silver; no longer remote, but near. I do not know how it happened, I only know that neither of us said a word; but suddenly I felt the silver coldness of her cheek on mine, and her tall pliant body pressed against me; and then the cool-warm moistness of her lips....

After an eternity. "I looked for you so long," she said. "I knew you had to be real. And then when I did see you there in the pit I was so ashamed—"

"It's all right," I said. "It's all right, darling."

"Desteil appropriated me a month ago. I lived on one of the collective farms. My father kept me hidden for years, and then there was that horrible afternoon when Desteil pulled an unexpected in-

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spection. I was in the fields, and I came walking into the community square not knowing, and suddenly there he was—"

"It's all right," I said again. Her cheeks were wet and I kissed the silver tears away.

"When I saw you in the Dream I knew that you were the only one, that there could never be anyone else but you, and I wanted you to be the one who kissed me first, who—"

"I kissed you first," I said. "That's the only kiss that counts. What went before doesn't matter."

"I—I don't even know your name."

"Alan."

"You know mine of course. Only it was Dianna originally, but Special Service changed it to Diane. They said 'Diane' looked better on the marquee."

"Dianna or Diane, I love you just the same."

"I love you too, Alan. I've loved you for years. It's so strange, loving someone before you even meet them, dreaming of them before you even see them. Do you have the same Dream, Alan? The grayness and the awful silence, the feeling of movement. The man without a face."

"Yes," I said.

"Sometimes I think I can't stand it any longer, that I must be losing my mind. What's the reason for it, Alan? Why do we dream the same Dream every night?"

"I don't know yet."

I told her about Acktus and his work in ontology and I described my experience of the night before when Acktus had tried to project his new reality.

The moonlight seemed to grow brighter around us and suddenly I noticed Diane's clothes—the simple white dress, the cheap three quarter length coat. "Your dress," I said. "Your coat—"

"They're my own," she said proudly. "Desteil has nothing to do with them... That's why I wore them."

"They're the same dress and coat you're wearing in the Dream."

She raised her arm and stared at the blue sleeve. She glanced down at the part of the dress visible beneath the hem of the coat. "Why yes," she said wonderingly. "They are the same." She looked at me, at my ragged suit, my even more ragged coat. "And your clothes—they're the same too."

She was right. Suddenly I had the feeling that the answer to our double existence was very close. "Come on," I said. "I'm going to take you to Acktus."

"But Desteil. If I'm not back soon he'll miss me. He'll alert the whole city."

"I can't let you go back to him no matter what he does. Would you want to go back?"

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I felt the shudder that shook her slender body. "No. Never," she said.

We started down the steps. The rift in the clouds had narrowed, but the moonlight still streamed brightly through it, turning the long sodden grass to silver surf, making silver lacework out of trees and bushes; glinting here and there in the darker places as though the tangled branches had shattered it into shards. . . .

Or swords—

I pulled Diane back up the steps and into the shadowed entrance. The dozen aristo-militarists who had been hiding in the shrubbery stepped into the clearing and ran toward us. One of them, taller than the others, seemed familiar. The moonlight briefly illumined his pointed features and I recognized him as Desteil.

I guided Diane into the interior of the museum and up the dusty stairs that led to the mezzanine. All the while I kept thinking of the enlisted man who had watched me in the cafe, of the other enlisted men who must have watched me walk the streets and relayed my every movement to their C.O. In coming to the museum I had taken every devious route I knew, and I had doubled back several times to check on possible pursuit. But apparently I hadn't been careful enough.

Or perhaps Diane hadn't been careful enough. Perhaps Desteil had followed her. We had underestimated him badly. The amusement I had seen in his eyes should have told me that he had seen Diane look at me the previous night—look at me and blush, and then finish her walk without removing another scarf.

Now he had come to retrieve his mistress personally, and to take care of her lover. But not out of anger. He merely wished to gratify his ego further by denying me something only he could have. Diane's infidelity meant nothing to a man of his values. She was nothing but a peasant girl whom he had appropriated. He owned her, he did not love her.

Boots were resounding on the floor below and torches were crisscrossing the darkness with rapiers of light. When Diane and I reached the mezzanine I felt around for the ancient upright piano that had graced the head of the stairs for more than a century. My fingers touched the dusty mahogany, and I put my shoulder to the wood and pushed. Castors creaked, betraying our position, but the ponderous instrument moved and I knew it could be moved further.

If the aristo-militarists had known the nature of the massive object their torches picked up beside Diane and myself, they never would have

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started up the stairs. I let them get halfway, then, with Diane's help, sent the quarter ton upright on its downward journey.

The stairway was narrow, flanked by the wall on one side and a wrought iron railing on the other. There was a medley of shouts and screams when the aristo-militarists saw the unanticipated weapon hurtling down upon them. The lights of their discarded torches danced wildly as they vaulted the rail and dropped to the floor below.

The piano ended its career at the bottom of the stairs with a crash of broken chords. Diane and I were just behind it. We made our way to the entrance before the routed aristo-militarists could reorganize, and hurried out into the night. Ragged clouds again obscured the moon and the grounds were shrouded in utter darkness.

Both of us had come on foot to the museum and I assumed that Desteil and his men had also come on foot. But I had little doubt that there would be fliers on the scene before long, so the sooner we reached the labyrinthine, frequently canopied, streets of the ghetto, the safer we would be.

I led the way across the grounds to the city cemetery. We picked our way through the artificial hills and dales of the enlisted men's acres, went around the high wall that enclosed the sacrosanct aristo-militarist's acres, passed through the low-lying swampy area set aside for civilslave dead, and came finally to the ghetto. There were no signs of pursuit, but still I did not dare to stop and rest. I hurried Diane through the narrow streets, through the alleys and the courtyards, past the market place—

"Alan, you're limping."

I stopped then. "Yes," I said.

"I didn't know you hurt yourself. Why didn't you tell me?"

"It happened a long time ago." The old bitterness crept into my voice despite all my efforts to hold it back.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Alan. You don't have to tell me about it."

"But I do have to tell you," I said. "I should have told you before."

When I finished telling her I felt her hand in mine. For a long while neither of us spoke. Dead leaves scuttered through the streets and the November wind howled us the clouds hung lower among the buildings. Behind than ever, some of them so low they seemed to touch the hut tops. Clouds....

Or lightless fliers—

I drew Diane back beneath the overhang of a low rooftop, straining my eyes in the darkness. She did not notice my apprehension. "Try not to be so bitter, darling," she

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said. "The aristo-militarists are unhappy too. Even Desteil is unhappy. If you ever heard him scream in the night you would pity instead of hate him."

"Nothing could ever make me pity him," I said. I was quite certain now that the dark blurs over the hut tops were fliers.

"I have wondered many times about his screams," Diane went on. "They sound like the screams of a man in terrible physical pain, in unbelievable physical pain. Now I think I know the answer.

"In the Dream the man without a face wears an aristo-militarist's uniform. The blood from his wound has obscured his collar insigne, so I have been unable to make out his rank. But he is tall and thin, and very familiar. Both of us have seen him before."

I was staring at her now, the fliers momentarily forgotten. "Desteil," I said.

She nodded. "*He* is the man without a face."

## VI

ACKTUS said: "It is time to analyze the Dream."

Diane and I had remained beneath the overhang till the fliers had passed, then hurried through the remaining streets to the hut. I thought that Acktus would advise us to leave the city, but he paid little attention to my account of Desteil's ambush, and when I told him about the fliers he did not seem at all perturbed. He merely nodded and asked Diane to tell him her version of the Dream.

Now he stood stolidly before us, his anthropoid arms hanging low and motionless at his sides, his neanderthalic face impassive. Diane, after the shock of seeing him for the first time, had related her version—essentially the same as mine—calmly and simply, and now regarded him with dawning awe.

"Even though both of you —and the third party as well —have been experiencing the Dream for a number of years, the incident that provoked it has not yet occurred." Acktus raised his great hand as I started to interrupt him. "Please let me finish, Alan. There is very little time, and when you arrive on Sirius 9 I want you to understand why your transition was instantaneous in one sense, yet required over eight years in another."

The soft voice issuing from the coarse lips was soothing. I could see Diane relax in the lantern light and I felt my own tenion depart. In the presence of this fantastic man, no one could feel insecure.

"If we include the period of partial awareness which preceded your perception of each other, the Dream began about eight years and eight

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months ago. The fact that neither of you was able to 'see' the third party as anything more than a vague man-shape till much later in the Dream suggests that the events preceding the inception will be of so unpleasant a nature as to cause both your psyches to throw up blocks.

"Since both you, Alan, and you, Diane, are experiencing the Dream, we can tentatively conclude that the third party also is experiencing it—though in quite a different way. But before we can understand the nature of his experience we must first get at the root of the Dream itself."

Acktus paused a moment, his head tipped to one side as though he were listening. But there was no sound except the whine of the wind and the sporadic rattling of the corrugated iron roof. Presently: "Last night I said that it might be possible to create an individual subjective reality than the mass force field of ideas in which we are imprisoned; I also said that if I could temporarily free my mind from the *a priori* factor I might be able to move not only myself but others as well from one subjective point in the thing-in-itself to another subjective point—without benefit of machines of any kind. My reasoning was deficient on two counts: 1) transition of this kind does require a machine—a human machine, and 2) since the *a priori* factor would still be present in the minds of the other persons whom I teleported, it could not fail to have some effect upon the teleportation.

"Consider. The mass force field of ideas is humanity's cooperative effort to perceive the thing-in-itself. If this force field has matured during the subjective tenure of mankind; becoming more and more complicated, more and more replete with ideas, so too has the *a priori* factor which helped to mold it.

"Eoanthropus merely had to separate trees and hills, days and nights. The stars in the sky were lights to him, so subjectively close that he could touch them if he climbed a high enough mountain. And the sun was merely a celestial bonfire, no farther away than the stars. Eoanthropus' *a priori* factor was as immature and as primitive as the force field of ideas to which he contributed.

"But now the force field of ideas has matured to a point where we have to separate continents and seas, centuries and millenia; stars and island universes. Space and time have run together, becoming one, and the *a priori* factor of modern man encompasses the limiting factor of the speed of light—"

Abruptly the sound of shouting came from the street. There was the crackle

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of a photon gun followed by a woman's scream.

"Desteil!" I said. "He's searching the whole area. We've got to get out of here!"

"No." The massive face seemed suddenly older in the yellow lantern light. There were lines around the mouth that had never been there before and the eyes were more sunken than ever.

Diane was standing close to me and I put my arm around her shoulders. "Don't be afraid," I heard Acktus say. "There is nothing for either of you to be afraid of. In a short while you will be in paradise.

"The Dream which you have been experiencing for eight years and eight months is an unconscious *a priori* rationalization of your instant transition from here to Sirius 9.

"While it seems to be one Dream because of your similar versions, actually it is two separate Dreams—three, if we count the third person's version. In your case it seems identical because both of you will be similarly involved in the incident which will provoke it.

"The physical appearance which you ascribe to the other persons is valid because you are rationalizing their transition as well as your own. However, while you seem to 'see' them without the aid of light, you are actually 'remembering' them as they will be at the moment of transition.

"The actions and reactions which you ascribe to the other persons are fictitious. For instance. Alan, when you said that Diane's face turned white, that her body went rigid, and that her lips parted in a soundless scream when she realized that the third person had no face, your cliches betrayed you. You *assumed* she would react that way because the heroines in the romantic fiction you have read invariably react that way, and your unconscious mind visualized the assumption.

"And when you tried to communicate with her by lip-reading you got nowhere because you would have had to supply the answers to your own questions. Your unconscious mind did not have those answers because they weren't essential to the *a priori* rationalization.

"Your Dreams are spaceless, except for the distance between your bodies, because even the *a priori* factor cannot impose space where no objects exist. But the *idea* of space is there.

"Your Dreams are lightless because, while the *a priori* factor includes the speed of light, it does not include light itself, and therefore cannot supply it. Your sense of movement at extreme velocity from one point to another

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point arises from the *a priori* fact that if a body exchanges spatial co-ordinates it *must* move. But while your subjective velocity can equal the speed of light, *it can never exceed the speed of light—*"

There was a pounding on the door.

For a moment none of us moved or spoke. Then Acktus said: "I meant to free the whole world, but I could only free two people. But the mass force field of ideas is never permanent, and while it shifts from one extreme to another, perhaps some day mass man will create his own utopia."

The pounding was repeated, louder than before. Acktus walked slowly across the room. "Causality is a mockery," he said, and threw open the door.

Desteil stood on the threshold. Behind him the faces of his officers showed pale and unreal in the lantern light. He had drawn his sword. His eyes, surveying the room over Acktus' tremendous shoulders, were a glacial blue. When they touched Diane the blueness intensified but the coldness did not go away.

He raised his free arm in an attempt to shove Acktus to one side. He would have obtained more perceptible results had he tried to move a mountain. His eyes flickered. "Mutant!" he said. "Ape!" His sword flashed as he drew it back.

Acktus caught the blade in his chest. He did not move from the doorway, but he turned sideways, tearing the hilt from Desteil's grasp. I saw the sword jutting grotesquely from the anthropoid torso and the room went red. Suddenly I was running toward Desteil, oblivious to everything except his gray-collared throat.

I almost reached him; my yearning fingertips brushed the gray collar. Then Acktus' girder-like arm came up, knocking my breath away and flinging me back across the room. Diane was just behind me and when I collided with her both of us tumbled against the wall and slid to the floor.

I lay there half stunned, watching the scene before me. Desteil still stood in the doorway. He was trying to back through it now, but the pressure of his own men behind him was his own undoing. He fumbled wildly for his photon gun but fright had turned his fingers to clay.

Acktus was an immobile ape-god. Abruptly he seized the sword jutting from his chest and jerked it free. He hurled it to the floor. His right arm rose slowly, relentlessly; his massive hand opened. Desteil's scream ended in a gurgling ellipsis when his face was torn away. He staggered into the room and collapsed at Diane's feet, the gray breast of his coat scar-

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let with the first surge of blood.

Acktus couldn't have had more than a second before the first photon charge struck him. But that second was enough. Lines of concentration fissured his face; cornices and ledges stood out gaunt and cold. The room dimmed, darkened, and through the darkness I heard his final words:

"Sirius 9, Alan. Take it and guard it well."

## VII

DIANE and I were standing on a green hilltop in the warm light of a brilliant blue-white sun. The hill sloped gently down into a fertile valley of orchards and vineyards and green grass. In the distance a winding river sparkled through the pale verdure of youthful trees.

Above us arched a bluer sky than we had ever known on Earth, and into it the sun was climbing, a great and gentle god of blue-white light. Below the sun, near the horizon, was another sun, a tiny diamond point of brightness—a perfect morning star.

In that first sweet moment of the new reality we forgot that there had ever been a man without a face. It was only when we lowered our eyes from the matchless sky that we saw the dead man on the slope below us and knew that the Dream was forever over and gone.

I saw the bewilderment in Diane's eyes.

"Acktus didn't have a chance to elaborate on his explanation," I said. "You see, our instantaneous movement from Earth to Sirus 9 violated a subjective fact. We unconsciously rationalized that violation, and the rationalization appeared to us in the form of a repetitious dream.

"The distance from Earth to Sirius 9—in a subjective sense—is approximately 8.65 light years. Subjectively, the speed of light cannot be exceeded, so it is subjectively impossible for a body, or bodies, to travel 8.65 light years in less than eight years and eight months. Therefore, our instantaneous movement, in order to make *a priori* sense, had to begin eight years and eight months before it actually started—unconsciously, of course, and in the form of a dream. Our insistent sense of movement at extreme velocity—the velocity of light—and our conviction that we were traveling from one spatial point to another spatial point, bears this out.

"You and I had to rationalize not only our own instantaneous transition but that of the other persons involved as well. During the early phase of the Dream we weren't trying to 'see' each other, as we thought. We were trying to 'remember' each other—from the future. Such a para-

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dox is possible because true reality—the thing-in-itself—is timeless.

"And Desteil?" Diane asked.

I took her hand and we walked down the hillside to where the dead man lay. Diane turned away but I forced myself to kneel down beside the inert body and forced my fingers to touch the limp wrist. It was still warm but it contained no vestige of life.

I stood up. "He couldn't have died before the transition was completed," I said, "so he must have experienced the Dream. But not quite the same Dream we experienced. In effecting the teleportation Acktus had to convey the information that our destination was the ninth planet of Sirius, and since Desteil, like all aristo-militarists, was well-grounded in scientific knowledge, he must have known that Sirius is 8.65 light years distant from Sol.

"However, his *a priori* rationalization did not need to include anyone beside himself because he did not know that you and I were also a part of the teleportation. So probably his Dream consisted of a spaceless, lightless, timeless void unpeopled by anyone other than himself, but in addition to the feeling of movement which we experienced he must have experienced something else. Pain."

Diane shuddered. "How horrible!" she said.

We stood there in silence for a while. A breeze sprang up in the valley, climbed the hill and kissed our faces. There was the sound of the singing of birds, and the scent of meadow flowers.

Suddenly Diane knelt down and plucked a blade of grass. She held it up to the blue-white sunlight and pinched it between her thumb and forefinger till her skin was stained with chlorophyll. She looked at me quizzically.

"All you've proved," I said, "is that Acktus was able to create a world physically identical to the world which mass man created in another phase of the thing-in-itself—Earth. Since he himself was unable to take advantage of his own creation, we have to conclude that movement through the thing-in-itself is possible only through the mind of a non-participator intellectually powerful enough to transcend the *a priori* factor."

"It *feels* real," Diane said, staring at the blade of grass between her green fingers.

"It *is* real. Subjectively real. And subjective reality is all that need ever concern us since it is all we can ever know. Sirius 9 is as valid as Sol 3 is."

She gave a nervous little laugh. "Perhaps more valid in one respect."

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I looked at her puzzledly. "In what respect?"

"We *know* there was a God."

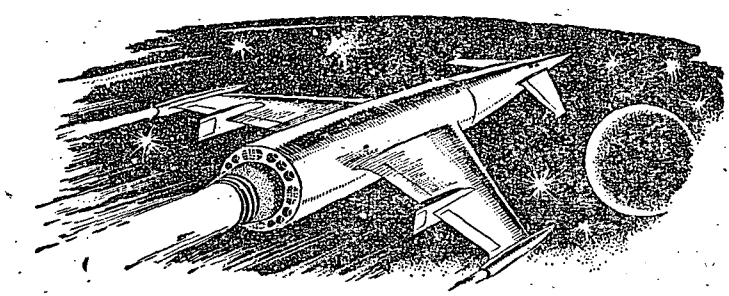
We buried Desteil on the hillside, then hand in hand we walked down into the valley toward the blueness of the river. I became aware of a new vitality coursing through my body, and I felt the wholeness of the new leg Acktus had given me. The air was sparkling, the sun warm. Meadow flowers rose round our knees at the foot of the hill, and lush orchards marched to meet us. The valley was a garden really, a paradise; a poem in living things.

Diane paused beneath a luxuriant tree, reached up and plucked a ripe red fruit. Suddenly I remembered Acktus saying that an alternative subjective reality had to be exhaustively fabricated, had to be complete down to the smallest detail; had to possess variations or duplications of all phenomena, both past and present, of the mass force field of ideas.

That was when I saw the serpent coiled around the tree.

I knocked the fruit from Diane's hand before it could touch her lips. Homo sapiens II would probably turn out to be a toolmaker like Homo sapiens I.

But at least he was going to begin life with a clear conscience!



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# mr. replogle's dream

*by ... EVELYN E. SMITH*

**This was a proud day in the life of modern art. This exhibition would prove that the machine could not conquer man.**

"THIS," SAID Mr. Ditmars, "is a proud day in the life of the Cimabue Gallery."

"It is a proud day in the life of modern art," added Mr. Replogle, feeling that Mr. Ditmars was giving too parochial a picture of the situation, "for it proves with more force than ever that the machine will not conquer man."

Both partners gazed with varying degrees of complacency at the large, brightly-colored oil paintings that covered the refined pastel walls of the Cimabue. There was almost nothing machine-made about the gallery—the thick, soft rugs had been hand-woven at fabulous expense by workmen in the less industrialized areas of the Middle East, the furnishings hand-carved by tribesmen deep in the heart of the Australian bush. The only exception was the robot attendants, which were, unfortunately, necessary, for no one paid attention to human beings any more unless they were top management or very high in the hierarchy of handcrafters.

*The Cimabue Gallery was the last stronghold of nostalgia—expensive nostalgia. Apart for the robot attendants—unfortunately necessary, the times being what they were—there was practically nothing machine-made about the Gallery, dedicated as it was to being more than a mere commercial venture. Evelyn E. Smith returns to these pages with a gently ironic story of men and dreams—the day after tomorrow...*



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Cimabue could afford all this luxury, and more too, for, now that big business had become an art, art had become a big business. People saved the excess from their government subsidies—or, if they were lucky enough to have professional status, their salaries—to buy a painting, a holograph manuscript... anything to distinguish their homes from the uniform grey mass of material comforts which the government bestowed on everyone alike. As a result, the partners were as wealthy as anyone outside the ruling class could hope to be. However, Mr. Replogle, at least, was not happy. He suffered from nightmares.

"But where is Orville?" demanded the man from the *Times-Herald-Mirror*. "We haven't come to interview you two—you always say the same thing about every new artist you discover. In fact, we already have your words set up in type."

Mr. Ditmars gave him a benign smile. "Orville's case is different. Never before in history has an absolutely unknown artist received such an immediate ovation from the public. Why, almost every picture on exhibit is already sold—the buyers have kindly allowed us to retain them on our walls for the duration of the show as a service to the public."

"Cimabue is more than a mere commercial venture," Mr. Replogle added, wishing he could slip off for a paraspirin; his head hurt most mechanically. "It is a cultural institution."

"Yeah, Orville did get pretty good write-ups," the *World-Post and Journal* man conceded, "though any halfway decent artist sells like hotcakes these days. People naturally go for anything that's hand-made." And he fingered his hand-painted tie self-consciously. "But it can't last."

This disturbed Mr. Replogle more than it should have. But he had been bothered for many years by his recurring dream—a dream so frightful that he did not dare to confide it to anyone because of its terrifying plausibility. And anything said or done by day that seemed to approach that midnight horror roused him to immediate defensiveness. "Oh, yes it can last!" he protested. "It will! It must! For art is the people's last bulwark against the machine—the one area which cannot be mechanized, which reassures the human race that it still is pre-eminent."

"Kindly do not touch the pictures," the roboguard droned.

"I was only feeling Orville's impasto," the lady from the *Woman's Own News* defended herself. "Very thick."

*I couldn't have told her to stop*, Mr. Replogle reflected

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bitterly. *Coming from me it would have been rude, but from a robot it's all right. Everyone knows a robot's only aim is to serve man. Our altruism depends on our individual consciences; theirs is built-in and, hence, more reliable.*

"But where *is* Orville?" the man from the *Times-Herald-Mirror* persisted. "He was supposed to be here at three-thirty, and it's almost four now."

"Softly, softly," said Mr. Ditmars. "The robobar doesn't open itself until four anyway, so you know you're in no hurry.... And, remember, a great artist mustn't be rushed—he is not a machine, you know."

"Hervey McGeachin is bringing him," Mr. Replogle explained. "One could hardly hurry McGeachin," he added...unnecessarily, for everyone knew that one didn't hurry the richest man in the United States—one awaited his pleasure. Beside being fabulously wealthy, McGeachin had the reputation of being something of a recluse, but this did not make him more newsworthy, for all members of top management tended to be a bit eccentric. The rank was hereditary—it took more than one generation for a family to begin to understand its machines—and there was a lot of inbreeding, with the usual results.

"Orville is a protege of Mr. McGeachin's, isn't he?" asked the lady from *Woman's Own*.

"Yes," Mr. Ditmars said. "All that was in the press release. He's one of Mr. McGeachin's employees. Mr. McGeachin discovered him personally, and he got in touch with *us*." Mr. Ditmars almost swelled with visible pride; Mr. Replogle wished he would exercise a bit more self-restraint. Such an open display of emotion was vulgar—almost mechanical, one might say. Especially since they themselves were management, in a way, although one didn't, of course, apply such a word to those who dealt in the arts and crafts. The general public feared and respected the management which governed them, but they loved entrepreneurs.

"A factory hand!" *Woman's Own* gushed. "What a story that will make!"

The male reporters laughed as one male. "Where have you been all these years, cookie?" asked the *World-Post and Journal*. "I doubt if there's a factory left in the United States that isn't mechanized to the very hilt by now—with robot labor for the more specialized operations."

"I know," she sighed. "Deep down inside of me I really know. I was just hoping. I suppose I am—" and she batted her eyelashes "—like all females, an incurable romantic. What *do* you

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suppose Orville is, then?"

"Might be a clerk," *Time-week* suggested. "A lot of the big places still use live clerical help for tone, and, of course, you always need a few human beings around in case the machines break down."

"I somehow got the impression that he was an executive," Mr. Ditmars said frostily.

"Let's hope not. It would ruin the human element in the story. You can't expect our readers to identify with management."

"A minor executive, that is," Mr. Replogle hastened to inform them, before Ditmars could open his big mouth again. "More like a shipping clerk."

"Is Orville his first or his last name?" *Woman's Own* wanted to know.

"Just Orville," Mr. Ditmars said. "Like Rembrandt."

"Of course Rembrandt did have a last name," Mr. Replogle pointed out. "He just isn't known by it."

"And Orville's more like Grandma Moses, anyhow, I would say," commented the *Times-Herald-Mirror*.

"He is a primitive, true," Mr. Replogle said judiciously. "If you insist upon pinning a label on him, you might call him a post pre-Raphaelite, with just a soupcon of Rousseau."

"I didn't know Rousseau painted," the *World-Post and Journal* man said, busily clicking on his typopad.

"Not that one," Mr. Replogle told him kindly. "The other two."

"How old is Orville?" *Woman's Own* held her typopad at the ready. "How many children does he have? Is he married? Fond of animals? What does he eat for breakfast?"

"For heaven's sake," Mr. Ditmars exploded, "it isn't the man himself that matters—it's the man as interpreted through his art! And you can see that art for yourself." He waved his arms toward the pale gallery walls. "Drink it in and absorb the essence of the rtist."

"But we'd like a little more factual data, as a point of departure. After all, our readers—"

"All right, all right," Mr. Ditmars said before Mr. Replogle could stop him, "I'll give you all the facts we have—to wit, none. All we know about Orville we put into the release. McGeachin's been keeping him under wraps. We don't know a thing about him. He's eccentric—McGeachin, I mean."

"Could be Orville also," the *World-Post and Journal* suggested.

Mr. Ditmars sighed. "Could be Orville also," he conceded.

"It's more of a story if Orville is eccentric. You more or less expect if from management."

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"Well," Mr. Replogle said, unable to contain himself further—his head was really blasting off—"artists can be pretty peculiar people too."

It was Mr. Ditmars' turn to glare at him.

"Make way for Hervey McGeachin III and Orville," the robot at the door declaimed. "Make way...."

Every head swivelled to catch sight of the well-known but seldom-seen financier, as he came jerkily through the crowd. All the journalists were dressed in the maroon or beige or navy synthetics of almost similar cut that mass production had enforced upon the entire population, save for the very wealthy. Gay knitted mittens, colorful plumed hats, rainbow-hued scarves—all of which were ostentatiously hand-made—showed that the pressmen were professionals and not mere government pensioners who could do nothing that a machine could not do as well or better. However, although there were no sumptuary laws as such, few of the journalists could afford more than one or two of these costly, status-making accessories.

McGeachin was completely costumed in rugged individualist style. His scarlet silk hose, emerald satin knee breeches, swallow-tailed plum velvet coat, and starched white ruff made Mr. Replogle, who had been rather proud of his own pale blue brocade waistcoat and sealskin mukluks almost sick with envy. *He's so hand-made he's practically mechanical,* he said bitterly to himself.

McGeachin was followed by a Class Three, All-Purpose Manual Labor Robot, well-burnished but of rather an early pattern. Surely, Mr. Replogle thought, if the financier had to use a mechanical man, and personal attendants were far more handmade, he could at least have got a more recent model.

"Welcome to Cimabue, Mr. McGeachin," Mr. Ditmars and Mr. Replogle said almost simultaneously.

"But where is Orville?" the senior partner added.

McGeachin pointed with his long green cigar. "This is Orville," he said in a crisp metallic voice.

Mr. Replogle could feel himself growing pale all the way down to his mukluks. This was precisely the way his nightmare had always begun. Only now it was reality ...or was it? Perhaps he was back in the dream again. He could close his eyes and, when he opened them, he would be lying in his own standard air-conditioned toti-comfort sleeplounge under his own satin-covered, goose-down filled luxury quilt.

"A robot!" he could hear Mr. Ditmars wail, as the typopads began to click thinly, his voice somehow sounding

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far away. "How could you—why didn't you let us know he was a robot beforehand?"

Mr. Replogle opened his eyes and nothing had changed; it was all real—it was the end.

"Because you would have discriminated against him," Hervey McGeachin was saying, his grey face shiny with excessive emotion. "Everybody discriminates against my poor robots. Trustworthy, hard-working, clean, loyal to a fault—yet everybody discriminates against them merely because they're machines. I knew that, if I had told you he was a robot, you would never have hung his pictures in Cimabue, in spite of the fact that it was I who recommended him."

Top management or no, Mr. Replogle felt he must speak; there were principles at stake. The dismal future of humanity rested somehow in his own shaking hands. "Sir," he said, in a hoarse voice, "you have not dealt fairly with us. You said that this Orville was a protege of yours."

"And so he is." McGeachin put a thick, unmuscular arm around the robot's hard shoulders. "He is my protege and friend and I don't care if people do call me a robot-lover."

There was a gasp from the reporters, even those representing the liberal press.

McGeachin pointed his cigar at them. "Listen," he said. "Autobiographical note." Typopads began to click. "Up until the age of seventeen I hardly knew there was anybody on the planet but robots. My father didn't have time to mess around with kids, since he believed in running all of his multifarious industries personally. I, myself, though I tour the factories only once a year, have succeeded, by means of a computer and a ouija board, in increasing what little remained of his vast fortune after taxes to an amount that is ten times as great as his was at its peak."

"How do you spell *ouija?*" the man from the *World-Post and Journal* interrupted.

"So," McGeachin continued, after affably spelling the word and making a few adverse remarks on the sad state of current education, "during my childhood, I was left entirely in the care of robots, and I was a happy, carefree lad until I was sent to Harvard. There I discovered the dark truth which has overshadowed my life ever since and rendered me a virtual recluse—that there are also large numbers of people in the world. Give me a robot, any time. Trustworthy, hard-working, clean, loyal to a fault, and, in Orville's case, artistic also. Tell 'em how you started in to paint, Or-

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ville."

"Well, it was like this, gents," Orville said in a voice like a rusty hinge. "I work for the Perfect Paint Section of the Superior Chemicals Division of the Universal Materials Corporation, which is a subsidiary of the McGeachin interests, and, as I'm getting along in gears, I was put onto artists' oil colors, which are individually ground, like all the artists nowadays want 'em to be—"

"In all McGeachin products, from paints to parliaments," the financier interjected, "the customer comes first, insofar as his desires are compatible with the mass-production methods necessarily imposed upon us by automation."

"—And there was a little left over of some colors what wouldn't fit into the tubes, and the forebot says to me, he says, 'Throw 'em into the disposal, Orville—' "

"—All the McGeachin robots have names. It gives that personal touch I like to have around my plants." There was something extraordinarily odd about McGeachin, Mr. Replogle felt, though he couldn't quite put his finger on just what it was...something more than mere eccentricity, something curiously sinister.

"—And I says to the forebot, 'Begging your pardon, sir, but if there was no other use for 'em, I would like to try my hand at painting a picture like on the pretty calendars Perfect Paint sends out every Christmas.' And he says to me, laughing-like, 'Well, if that's what you want to do with your restoration period, Orville, more power to you'...which is—" the robot snickered "—a kind of little joke we have amongst ourselves at the factory."

One of the Cimabue robots gave a laugh which Mr. Replogle cut short with a glance.

"But I didn't know they could do that," the *Times-Herald-Mirror* said plaintively. "Laugh, I mean."

"Ah," McGeachin told him, "that's because you never bothered to understand the real robot. You don't look beyond the metal to the wires that vibrate underneath."

"So I painted a picture on a piece of cardboard," Orville continued patiently "—the side of a carton it was—and the picture was much admired in the plant, though I says it as shouldn't, and Mr. Pembroke, the superintendent, went so far as to ask if he might have it to hang in his office, which, of course, I was glad to have him do. And there it come to the attention of Mr. McGeachin when he was making his annual tour of the plant.... Mr. McGeachin is—" Orville approximated a modest cough "—by way of being a connoissoor."

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"When I saw that picture, I knew I was standing in the presence of solid genius," McGeachin took over. "Mind you, when I heard it had been painted by a robot, I was surprised myself, I admit it freely. But I was not prejudiced. I had spent all my life with machines and I knew of what fine handcraft they were capable. 'Why shouldn't a robot paint a picture?' I asked myself. 'No reason whatsoever,' I answered. And I was right, as is amply evidenced by this splendid and tastefully arranged display." He beamed at Mr. Ditmars, who groaned.

"But it's impossible," the lady from *Woman's Own* protested, looking as if only the dignity of her profession kept her from bursting into tears. "How could a robot paint a picture. How could it *want* to paint a picture?"

"I dunno," Orville, as the only one who could conceivably be expected to answer this question, said. "It just come to me like that. You could say I was inspired, I guess."

"But inspiration is a human prerogative! If a robot can be inspired, what is left for people now?"

"'Tisn't for me to say, miss," Orville said modestly, "only I don't see why we both couldn't be inspired. Peaceful coexistence, like. If robots are designed to serve man, they could do a better job of it if both—man and machine—work side by side harmoniously."

"*Work!*" exclaimed the male reporters unharmoniously.

Mr. Replogle closed his eyes. He had never expected to hear such a mechanical word in the chaste purlieux of his gallery—his and Mr. Ditmars' gallery, that was, but it didn't matter, soon it wouldn't be anybody's gallery. Reality was following the inexorable course of the dream and they were doomed.

"No offense intended," Orville said hastily. "I meant work like maybe painting or knitting. I didn't mean machine work."

"And why not machine work?" McGeachin demanded. "Why shouldn't man work with his hands instead of just crafting?"

A little man, Replogle thought, would be lynched for saying a more than mechanical thing like that—mechanical, why it was downright subversive!—but McGeachin was secure because of the position that he maintained only as a result of the sweat and toil of others. Only, of course, robots don't sweat. The light film that had begun to cover Orville was doubtless only excess oil. *Disgusting, nevertheless.*

"Listen," McGeachin said, pointing his long, green cigar

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at the reporters. "Important announcement. I have decided to replace all my feedback equipment, except where the most delicate operations are involved, by people."

The typopads clicked furiously.

"You ask me why?" although no one had; they were much too stunned. "Because robots, though trustworthy, hard-working, clean, and loyal to a fault, have one drawback—they're expensive. A worker dies or gets sick, it's no extra money out of my pocket—I got to pay taxes for his welfare anyway. A robot breaks down, his loss is all mine. A human worker I got to take care of maybe six, seven hours a day, a robot twenty-four hours—and it isn't as if they worked all that time; they got to have rest periods too, or they wear out too fast. A human worker isn't my responsibility—a robot I got to look out for all the time."

"But I thought you liked machines better than people," Mr. Replogle said.

"So, is management expected to like labor? Is labor supposed to like management? Traditional enemies. I just figured out why I've been so unhappy most of my life—I *like* my employees. It's unnatural. It's—"

"Wrong, Mr. McGeachin?" quavered *Woman's Own*. "What do you mean?"

"I'm going to put people in my factories and have robots at my dinner table.... They don't eat—" McGeachin chuckled fruitily "—so you can see what an economy move that would be."

Nobody laughed. If McGeachin hadn't been top management—really top management—Mr. Replogle knew, he would have been torn to pieces. But top management was boss; it was government; it was divine right. Nobody did anything.

"If the machine can replace man," Orville suggested, "why can't man replace the machine? Plenty of room for both.... Did I say something wrong?" he added, seeing the expressions on the human faces that surrounded him.

"You're just ahead of your time, boy." McGeachin clapped him on the shoulder. "But you're right. Why can't man co-exist with the machine? Why can't robots paint pictures and write books and compose operas, while people work in the factories? Don't know just yet how it'll work out in the factories, but it'll be a great day for art!"

"We're going to have to give the money back," Mr. Replogle said dully.

"What money?" McGeachin asked, obviously annoyed by this anticlimactic remark.

"The money paid for Orville's pictures. We cheated

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the buyers—unwittingly, it is true, but we cheated them nonetheless. We sold the pictures as hand-mades. They're machined."

"But I have hands," Orville protested.

Mr. Ditmars shook his head. "You're a machine. Replogle is right. Cimabue is ruined."

"I'll make good your losses," McGeachin said in his crisp metallic voice, and just then Mr. Replogle knew what had been bothering him all along about the financier. Despite his completely hand-made costume McGeachin looked exactly like a robot. The triumph of environment over heredity—or was it as simple as that, Mr. Replogle wondered. Everyone knew who Hervey McGeachin's father was, but who had his mother been?

"No one can make good our losses," Mr. Ditmars told him. "Modern art has suffered a crushing blow from which it will never recover. The handwriting is on the wall."

"You mean the typewriting," Mr. Replogle said.

ALSO IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE—

C. L. MOORE'S remarkable vignette, SONG IN A MINOR KEY
L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP'S challenging A THING OF CUSTOM
JOHN BRUNNER'S sensitive EYE OF THE BEHOLDER
POUL ANDERSON'S strange story of trolls, THE VALOR OF CAPPEN VARRA

—ADDITIONAL REASONS WHY *FANTASTIC UNIVERSE* IS AMERICA'S MOST EXCITING MAGAZINE OF SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY!

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# gods of the north

*by . . . ROBERT E. HOWARD*

**She drew away from him, dwindling in the witch-fire of the skies, until she was a figure no bigger than a child.**

THE CLANGOR of the swords had died away. the shouting of the slaughter was hushed; silence lay on the red-stained snow. The pale bleak sun that glittered so blindingly from the ice-fields and the snow-covered plains struck sheens of silver from rent corselet and broken blade, where the dead lay in heaps. The nerveless hand yet gripped the broken hilt: helmeted heads, back-drawn in the death throes, tilted red beards and golden beards grimly upward. as if in last invocation to Ymir the frost-giant.

Across the red drifts and mail-clad forms, two figures approached one another. In that utter desolation only they moved. The frosty sky was over them, the white illimitable plain around them, the dead men at their feet. Slowly through the corpses they came, as ghosts might come to a tryst through the shambles of a world.

Their shields were gone, their corselets dinted. Blood smeared their mail; their

*The publication of this strange story by Robert E. Howard, author of the Conan stories, so much a part of the Living Library of Fantasy, represents a departure for this magazine. Without abandoning our policy of bringing you, month after month, the best in NEW Science Fiction and Fantasy, we will, from time to time, publish material such as this, hitherto known to only a few students of the field! GODS OF THE NORTH was published in 1934, in Charles D. Hornig's THE FANTASY FAN, which had a circulation of under a hundred! We thank Sam Moskowitz, Editor and SF historian, who showed us this story.*



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swords were red. Their horned helmets showed the marks of fierce strokes.

One spoke, he whose locks and beard were red as the blood on the sunlit snow.

"Man of the raven locks," said he, "tell me your name, so that my brothers in Vanaheim may know who was the last of Wulfhere's band to fall before the sword of Heimdul."

"This is my answer," replied the black-haired warrior: "Not in Vanaheim, but in Vallahalla will you tell your brothers the name of Amra of Akbitana."

Heimdul roared and sprang, and his sword swung in a mighty arc. Amra staggered and his vision was filled with red sparks as the blade shivered into bits of blue fire on his helmet. But as he reeled he thrust with all the power of his great shoulders. The sharp point drove through brass scales and bones and heart, and the red-haired warrior died at Amra's feet.

Amra stood swaying, trailing his sword, a sudden sick weariness assailing him. The glare of the sun on the snow cut his eyes like a knife and the sky seemed shrunken and strangely far. He turned away from the trampled expanse where yellow-bearded warriors lay locked with red-haired slayers in the embrace of death. A few steps he took, and the glare of the snow fields was suddenly dimmed. A rushing wave of blindness engulfed him, and he sank down into the snow, supporting himself on one mailed arm, seeking to shake the blindness out of his eyes as a lion might shake his mane.

A silvery laugh cut through his dizziness, and his sight cleared slowly. There was a strangeness about all the landscape that he could not place or define—an unfamiliar tinge to earth and sky. But he did not think long of this. Before him, swaying like a sapling in the wind, stood a woman. Her body was like ivory, and save for a veil of gossamer, she was naked as the day. Her slender bare feet were whiter than the snow they spurned. She laughed, and her laughter was sweeter than the rippling of silvery fountains, and poisonous with cruel mockery.

"Who are you?" demanded the warrior.

"What matter?" Her voice was more musical than a silver-stringed harp, but it was edged with cruelty.

"Call up your men" he growled, grasping his sword. "Though my strength fail me, yet they shall not take me alive. I see that you are of the Vanir."

"Have I said so?"

He looked again at her unruly locks, which he had thought to be red. Now he saw that they were neither

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red nor yellow, but a glorious compound of both colors. He gazed spell-bound. Her hair was like elfin-gold, striking which, the sun dazzled him. Her eyes were neither wholly blue nor wholly grey, but of shifting colors and dancing lights and clouds of colors he could not recognize. Her full red lips smiled, and from her slim feet to the blinding crown of her billowy hair, her ivory body was as perfect as the dream of a god. Amra's pulse hammered in his temples.

"I can not tell," said he, "whether you are of Vanaheim and mine enemy, or of Asgard and my friend. Far have I wandered, from Zingara to the Sea of Vilayet, in Stygia and Kush, and the country of the Hyrkanians; but a woman like you I have never seen. Your locks blind me with their brightness. Not even among the fairest daughters of the Aesir have I seen such hair, by Ymir!"

"Who are you to swear by Ymir?" she mocked. "What know you of the gods of ice and snow, you who have come up from the south to adventure among strangers?"

"By the dark gods of my own race!" he cried in anger. "Have I been backward in the sword-play, stranger or no? This day I have seen four score warriors fall, and I alone survive the field where Mulfhere's reavers met the men of Bragi. Tell me, woman, have you caught the flash of mail across the snow-plains, or seen armed men moving upon the ice?"

"I have seen the hoar-frost glittering in the sun," she answered. "I have heard the wind whispering across the everlasting snows."

He shook his head.

"Niord should have come up with us before the battle joined. I fear he and his warriors have been ambushed. Wulfhere lies dead with all his weapon-men.

"I had thought there was no village within many leagues of this spot, for the war carried us far, but you can have come no great distance over these snows, naked as you are. Lead me to your tribe, if you are of Asgard, for I am faint with the weariness of strife."

"My dwelling place is further than you can walk, Amra of Akbitana!" she laughed. Spreading wide her arms she swayed before him, her golden head lolling wantonly, her scintillant eyes shadowed beneath long silken lashes. "Am I not beautiful, man?"

"Like Dawn running naked on the snows," he muttered, his eyes burning like those of a wolf.

"Then why do you not rise and follow me? Who is the strong warrior who falls down before me?" she chanted in maddering mockery. "Lie down and die in the snow with the other fools,

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Amra of the black hair. You can not follow where I would lead."

With an oath the man heaved himself upon his feet, his blue eyes blazing his dark scarred face convulsed. Rage shook his soul, but desire for the taunting figure before him hammered at his temples and drove his wild blood riotiously through his veins. Passion fierce as physical agony flooded his whole being so that earth and sky swam red to his dizzy gaze, and weariness and faintness were swept from him in madness.

He spoke no word as he drove at her fingers hooked like talons. With a shriek of laughter she leaped back and ran, laughing at him over her white shoulder. With a low growl Amra followed. He had forgotten the fight, forgotten the mailed warriors who lay in their blood, forgotten Niord's belated reavers. He had thought only for the slender white shape which seemed to float rather than run before him.

Out across the white blinding plain she led him. The trampled red field fell out of sight behind him, but still Amra kept on with the silent tenacity of his race. His mailed feet broke through the frozen crust; he sank deep in the drifts and forged through them by sheer strength. But the girl danced across the snow as light as a feather floating across a pool; her naked feet scarcely left their imprint on the hoar-frost. In spite of the fire in his veins, the cold bit through the warrior's mail and furs; but the girl in her gossamer veil ran as lightly and as gaily as if she danced through the palms and rose gardens of Poitain.

Black curses drooled through the warrior's parched lips. The great veins swelled and throbbed in his temples, and his teeth gnashed spasmodically.

"You can not escape me!" he roared. "Lead me into a trap and I'll pile the heads of your kinsmen at your feet. Hide from me and I'll tear apart the mountains to find you! I'll follow you to hell and beyond hell!"

Her maddening laughter floated back to him, and foam flew from the warrior's lips. Further and further into the wastes she led him, till he saw the wide plains give way to low hills, marching upward in broken ranges. Far to the north he caught a glimpse of towering mountains, blue with the distance, or white with the eternal snows. Above these mountains shone the flaring rays of the borealis. They spread fan-wise into the sky, frosty blades of cold flaming light, changing in color, growing and brightening.

Above him the skies glowed and crackled with strange lights and gleams. The snow shone weirdly, now frosty

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blue, now icy crimson, now cold silver. Through a shimmering icy realm of enchantment Amra plunged doggedly onward, in a crystaline maze where the only reality was the white body dancing across the glittering snow beyond his reach—ever beyond his reach.

Yet he did not wonder at the necromantic strangeness of it all, not even when two gigantic figures rose up to bar his way. The scales of their mail were white with hoar-frost; their helmets and their axes were sheathed in ice. Snow sprinkled their locks; in their beards were spikes of icicles; their eyes were cold as the lights that streamed above them.

"Brothers!" cried the girl, dancing between them. "Look who follows! I have brought you a man for the feasting! Take his heart that we may lay it smoking on our father's board!"

The giants answered with roars like the grinding of icebergs on a frozen shore, and heaved up their shining axes as the maddened Akbitanan hurled himself upon them. A frosty blade flashed before his eyes, blinding him with its brightness, and he gave back a terrible stroke that sheared through his foe's thigh. With a groan the victim fell, and at the instant Amra was dashed into the snow, his left shoulder numb from the blow of the survivor, from which the warrior's mail had barely saved his life. Amra saw the remaining giant looming above him like a colossus carved of ice, etched against the glowing sky. The axe fell, to sink through the snow and deep into the frozen earth as Amra hurled himself aside and leaped to his feet. The giant roared and wrenched the axe-head free, but even as he did so, Amra's sword sang down. The giant's knees bent and he sank slowly into the snow which turned crimson with the blood that gushed from his half-severed neck.

Amra wheeled, to see the girl standing a short distance away, staring in wide-eyed horror, all mockery gone from her face. He cried out fiercely and the blood-drops flew from his sword as his hand shook in the intensity of his passion.

"Call the rest of your brothers!" he roared. "Call the dogs! I'll give their hearts to the wolves!"

With a cry of fright she turned and fled. She did not laugh now, nor mock him over her shoulder. She ran as for her life, and though he strained every nerve and thew, until his temples were like to burst and the snow swam red to his gaze, she drew away from him, dwindling in the witch-fire of the skies, until she was a figure no bigger than a child, then a dancing white flame on the

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snow, then a dim blur in the distance. But grinding his teeth until the blood started from his gums, he reeled on, and he saw the blur grow to a dancing white flame, and then she was running less than a hundred paces ahead of him, and slowly the space narrowed, foot by foot.

She was running with effort now, her golden locks blowing free; he heard the quick panting of her breath, and saw a flash of fear in the look she cast over her alabaster shoulder. The grim endurance of the warrior had served him well. The speed ebbed from her flashing white legs; she reeled in her gait. In his untamed soul flamed up the fires of hell she had fanned so well. With an inhuman roar he closed in on her, just as she wheeled with a haunting cry and flung out her arms to fend him off.

His sword fell into the snow as he crushed her to him. Her supple body bent backward as she fought with desperate frenzy in his iron arms. Her golden hair blew about his face, blinding him with its sheen; the feel of her slender figure twisting in his mailed arms drove him to blinder madness. His strong fingers sank deep into her smooth flesh, and that flesh was cold as ice. It was as if he embraced not a woman of human flesh and blood, but a woman of flaming ice. She writhed her golden head aside, striving to avoid the savage kisses that bruised her red lips.

"You are cold as the snows," he mumbled dazedly. "I will warm you with the fire in my own blood—"

With a desperate wrench she twisted from his arms, leaving her single gossamer garment in his grasp. She sprang back and faced him, her golden locks in wild disarray, her white bosom heaving, her beautiful eyes blazing with terror. For an instant he stood frozen, awed by her terrible beauty as she posed naked against the snows.

And in that instant she flung her arms toward the lights that glowed in the skies above her and cried out in a voice that rang in Amra's ears for ever after:

*"Ymir! Oh, my father, save me!"*

Amra was leaping forward, arms spread to seize her, when with a crack like the breaking of an ice mountain, the whole skies leaped into icy fire. The girl's ivory body was suddenly enveloped in a cold blue flame so blinding that the warrior threw up his hands to shield his eyes. A fleeting instant, skies and snowy hills were bathed in crackling white flames, blue darts of icy light, and frozen crimson fires. Then Amra staggered and cried out. The girl was gone. The glowing snow lay empty and bare;

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high above him the witch-lights flashed and played in a frosty sky gone mad and among the distant blue mountains there sounded a rolling thunder as of a gigantic war-chariot rushing behind steeds whose frantic hoofs struck lightning from the snows and echoes from the skies.

Then suddenly the borealis, the snowy hills and the blazing heavens reeled drunkenly to Amra's sight; thousands of fireballs burst with showers of sparks, and the sky itself became a titanic wheel which rained stars as it spun. Under his feet the snowy hills heaved up like a wave, and the Akbitanan crumpled into the snows to lie motionless.

In a cold dark universe, whose sun was extinguished eons ago, Amra felt the movement of life, alien and unguessed. An earthquake had him in its grip and was shaking him to and fro, at the same time chafing his hands and feet until he yelled in pain and fury and groped for his sword.

"He's coming to, Horsa," grunted a voice. "Haste—we must rub the frost out of his limbs, if he's ever to wield sword again."

"He won't open his left hand," growled another, his voice indicating muscular strain. "He's clutching something—"

Amra opened his eyes and stared into the bearded faces that bent over him. He was surrounded by tall golden-haired warriors in mail and furs.

"Amra! You live!"

"By Crom, Niord," gasped he, "am I alive, or are we all dead and in Valhalla?"

"We live," grunted the Aesir, busy over Amra's half-frozen feet. "We had to fight our way through an ambush, else we had come up with you before the battle was joined. The corpses were scarce cold when we came upon the field. We did not find you among the dead, so we followed your spoor. In Ymir's name, Amra, why did you wander off into the wastes of the north? We have followed your tracks in the snow for hours. Had a blizzard come up and hidden them, we had never found you, by Ymir!"

"Swear not so often by Ymir," muttered a warrior, glancing at the distant mountains. "This is his land and the god bides among yonder mountains, the legends say."

"I followed a woman," Amra answered hazily. "We met Bragi's men in the plains. I know not how long we fought. I alone lived. I was dizzy and faint. The land lay like a dream before me. Only now do all things seem natural and familiar. The woman came and taunted me. She was beautiful as a frozen flame from hell. When I looked at her I was as one mad, and forgot all else in the

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world. I followed her. Did you not find her tracks. Or the giants in icy mail I slew?"

Niord shook his head.

"We found only your tracks in the snow, Amra."

"Then it may be I was mad," said Amra dazedly. "Yet you yourself are no more real to me than was the golden haired witch who fled naked across the snows before me. Yet from my very hands she vanished in icy flame."

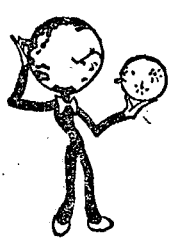
"He is delirious," whispered a warrior.

"Not so!" cried an older man, whose eyes were wild and weird. "It was Atali, the daughter of Ymir, the frost-giant! To fields of the dead she comes, and shows herself to the dying! Myself when a boy I saw her, when I lay half-slain on the bloody field of Wolraven. I saw her walk among the dead in the snows, her naked body gleaming like ivory and her golden hair like a blinding flame in the moonlight. I lay and howled like a dying dog because I could not crawl after her. She lures men from stricken fields into the wastelands to be slain by her brothers, the ice-giants, who lay men's red hearts smoking on Ymir's board. Amra has seen Atali, the frost-giant's daughter!"

"Bah!" grunted Horsa. "Old Gorm's mind was turned in his youth by a sword cut on the head. Amra was delirious with the fury of battle. Look how his helmet is dinted. Any of those blows might have addled his brain. It was an hallucination he followed into the wastes. He is from the south; what does he know of Atali?"

"You speak truth, perhaps," muttered Amra. "It was all strange and weird—by Crom!"

He broke off, glaring at the object that still dangled from his clenched left fist; the others gaped silently at the veil he held up—a wisp of gossamer that was never spun by human distaff.



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# their dreams remain

*by ... KENNETH BULMER*

**Somewheres on Mars—that very old planet that had once known life—two people were facing creation....**

SOMEWHERE on Mars—which had long been overlooked by go-getting humanity—two people were facing creation.

"I should have sent you back to Earth."

"No, Seton. This is right." Her dewed elfin face turned up towards him from the bed. "I stay here on the site, with you. I know I'm right—I know."

He beat a scarred fist into his palm. His eyes burrowed from their sockets like furtive tear drops; a big man and virile yet almost crushed by an event larger than his experience. For the event was life. She had known it longer than he, treasured it and secured it against the day when he had said: "You'll go back to Earth my girl. I'll book a compartment with Interplanetary. Just think—green fields and blue skies after this endless ochre stink! Man! But I'm lucky."

She had put one small pink finger on his arm, ruffling the hairs, feeling their prickling rebellion with a sensuous delight in her man. No-one

*Kenneth Bulmer, the well known English Science Fiction writer, tells a very old story set against an equally old background, in his sensitive "Their Dreams Remain." Mars was a forgotten world, a dust hole, filthy, decadent, without purpose and inhuman, and still this was where she had chosen to spurn the science Earth offered...and now she waited.... Will this be Mars tomorrow?*



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had ever done what she proposed. How brave she would have to be no-one could know.

"I'm staying here, Seton."

That was the sum and being of her life. Outside the dome thin acridity of reeking dust swathed the world in a fog of red oppression. Dryness sucked avidly at the man-made dwellings; heat and cold sustained a bitter attack. She had the alienness of her surroundings imprinted on her mind and shared with Seton and the members of the Mars Archaeological Expedition the enervating awareness that they were not wanted upon this planet. Mars was a backwater in galactic culture, a tidal creek that festered with red dust and forgotten hopes and a group of puttering men with tools for excavating a broken dream.

And she had said: "I'm staying here."

"Of course you can't!" Seton had said, half roughly, half jokingly, trying to respond to her fancied mood. "You'll go back to civilization like every other wife. Mars is savage, quite impossible—"

"But I shan't, Seton. I shall stay here."

A hundred times a day he had tried to sway her not able to comprehend the enormity of what she proposed. She kept her mind and will intact like a precious locket, snuggled on her bosom on a thin golden chain, secret, inviolate, sacrosanct. And a hundred times a day they were vitally conscious of the thin high skirl of the wind and the blowing sand and the marching red ruination that was Mars. Dust had buried under meticulous ever changing mounds the glories of a past that had breathed here when men slimed in stagnant pools. Sand had eroded the shining metropolis that man had once attempted to erect on a shifting foundation, and abandoned.

"Stay here? You're crazy!" Seton had thrown up the argument—had battled out into the storm, feeling the vibration of the wind against his suit, increasing the speed of his helmet wipers in blind defiance and cursing all women mad enough to leave civilization for the primitive hell of the diggings.

She had laughed, a tiny, excited, throaty gurgle, and gone back to dreaming.

And now the time was near. So near that the bed fumed in the heat of her writhing. She could feel the stronger fluttering of the new life. Her dark eyes held secrets that were old even before humanity had exploded the way to leave its home planet—who could say that those secrets were not old when the people of Mars had lived here, on this very spot where now a man-made dome huddled beneath the whips of the storm?

"Are you there, Seton?" she said breathlessly, suddenly, like a child bereft of a candle.

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"I'm here."

"Hold my hand."

Seton took her slender fingers, covering them with his rock-scarred hands.

"Not long now." His mind probed at his next duty. "Doctor Adams had to hustle in the workings. Number seven pit, late this morning. Shaft collapsed. Just as we were extracting what I think was an artifact that might give us the clue we need."

Despite her own sensitiveness—or because of it—she felt interest. This was her husband's work, this digging and probing into the ochre sandy soil of Mars, laboriously piecing together the scattered fragments of an older civilization. What he turned his brain to, there also she turned hers. The crumpled sheets were hot and feverish against her body.

"Collapsed? Was anyone hurt?"

"No, thank the Lord. But the artifact, whatever it was, disappeared under a hundred or so tons of dust and rock chips. I only caught a tantalizing glimpse of shapes—odd forms—hints at unguessable things." His hand tightened on hers. "Whoever lived on Mars before us died a long while ago. Such a very long while ago."

"And now we live here and try to find out about them." She was conscious of the wheeling wings of destiny, fluttering her blood with the movements of the new life. She knew Seton was talking to stop himself from thinking about her, and what he had allowed to happen. "Mars is our home, now," she said dreamily. "Just as much as it was theirs—all that time ago."

"How can you lie there and say this hell-hole is our home? As soon as the Expedition is over we'll head back to civilization—"

"Yes, but—"

"—we might not be able to afford to live permanently on Earth; but there are dozens of lovely planets, scattered among the nearer star systems. You'd like Prestonwell—all green and gold—"

She shuddered, her fingers clawing at his hand.

Afterwards, Seton heaved his shoulders lumpily. She could feel his muscles jumping under her fingers. He said, gruffly: "I should have made you go back to Earth."

"You didn't—and you wouldn't. Oh, yes, I know that you could; but in spite of yourself you know that this thing we are doing is our only answer. It is our only challenge to whatever Destiny decided that the old Martians should die. They failed. We must prove we can succeed. You are digging up the past, Seton; together, you and I, we are preparing the way to the future."

Her voice died like sound when an airlock opens.

She twisted into the sheets, gripping them, dragging

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them, her eyes wide with the pulsating wonder and shock that vibrated through her in surges of agonizing ecstasy. Moisture beaded her forehead and made a diamond diadem of heart-breaking beauty. She smiled at Seton, gasping for air, straining on his flesh for comfort and strength.

"No, not yet." She nodded weakly, her hair falling about her face. "Give me a drink."

"I can't stand much more of this." The plastic tumbler shook in Seton's hand.

She drank avidly. Inside their tiny dome, pressurized for this occasion to almost Earth normal atmosphere, the universe concentrated and distilled its whole meaning in terms of agony and purification. She knew this dwelling with the lack-lustre familiarity of long-enforced occupation of the body and roving joyous freedom of the spirit.

Seton's tools and equipment, neatly hung beside the airlock with his surface suit. His framed diploma, a dear archaic reminder of printing in an age of micro-film. His massive library of micro-recordings meticulously docketted and tabbed, whole volumes contained in a full stop. Wind etched orange rocks, laughingly brought in as ornaments, amusing in their fantastic configuration. The pervading aseptic smell of canned air, too familiar to be any longer hated, so utterly a part of life.

And, like the things of her home, she herself, self-dedicated to Seton, freely and joyously, forsaking comfort, seeking only to further his happiness and ambition on the coldly awful surface of Mars.

"When the hell is Doctor Adams coming?"

Seton freed his captive hand, convulsed to his feet like a startled colt, stood palely uncertain, frowning.

"He'll come." She soothed him with the stroking magic of her love. "When it's necessary, he'll come."

"I'm going for him. Anything could happen—"

"Don't fret yourself—"

"Fret! Who's fretting? My God, girl, don't you understand what's happening? If you'd gone to Earth they'd have wheeled you into a hundredth floor surgery and hypnotism would have taken care of everything."

"I don't want to be hypnotised!" She flared the words, her face animated and eyes a shadowed glitter in the grip of her passion. This she believed. "There's too much ultra-efficient machinery and soul-less dynamism back on Earth. They're all robots without the spark of sentiment. A whole planet converted into a single city! It's obscene. Concrete pavements from the Amazon to the Indes. Buy a ticket on the subway and burrow through the Earth's guts from pole to pole. Pity careful trees railed

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off with abrupt notices and strips of frightened grass! Can't you see, Seton, Earth is a mechanical monstrosity of rockets and machines and vitamins and television." She lay back, panting slightly.

"We've taken a blind turning somewhere—" she said, frustration making her face a battleground for shadows.

"I know. I know." Seton saw her flushed face with concern. "We agreed to come to Mars in the first place because of our feelings—I only took this job as a sort of reaction to progress, you know that. But this is different. Science can aid you now, as perhaps you've never been aided before. I'm not blind to what science can give. I'm not stifled by the way science is handled to appreciation of what it can do."

"All right—but in this, I'm right."

"You're just a stubborn woman."

"Women know when to be stubborn. They have a knack for it."

"Where the hell is Doctor Adams?"

She reached out a hand, caught his jacket.

"Tell me about the thing you found today."

"What? Oh, that. I told you, the sand buried it and there was no time to see what it was." The memory of that moment flooded back: he brooded alone, cut off from her reaching emotion.

"With all the functional expressionism of Earth at our disposal you'd think we could shift a few tons of sand easily." He laughed, a saw-cut of sound over the whispering fibrillation of the sand across the dome. "The damned dust poured back so fast you'd think gravity was greater here. Mars, planet of mystery!"

"Don't take on so, Seton. You'll excavate the thing again tomorrow."

"And tomorrow is Earth's today. Don't you see that?"

"Mars is the yesterday of us all. What happened here might have happened on Earth. At least we avoided the bombs and the radioactive dust and the bacteria. We packed our energies into a silver spaceship and rocketed them off to the stars. These poor people of Mars who died so long ago didn't have the necessary vision, or the courage. They introverted their hydrogen bombs and all that is left is outside now—a heap of dust."

"And we come along and violate that dust. Dig it up with our callous shovels and tabulate what we find. Classify a dream? Compartmentalise a hope?"

Seton pulled his surface suit from the rack with a gesture that she recognized.

"I'm going for Adams. I'll drag him here if I have to scour the whole site."

"If you must."

"I must. This is more important now. No-one was hurt

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this morning in the collapse. What is the man doing?"

"There are others here besides us, Seton."

"No-one fool enough to be doing what we're doing."

"We're doing the natural thing! I'm tired and frightened of scientific super-gadgetry, of running back to the mechanical bosom of mother Earth every time you scratch yourself."

"And now because of that I'm sweating on a representative of that science getting here to help you—"

"Perhaps I don't need his help."

He was appalled. "Not need a doctor? How crazy can you get? Of course you need a doctor and I'm fetching him now."

"And leave me alone?" The mischievous glint in her eyes could not be concealed; she found a delicious secret thrill in thus tormenting him. For all his strength he had weak chinks in his armour.

"Oh, my God—I can't, can I?"

"You want to fetch Doctor Adams, you want to stay here. If you can't reach him on the radio you'd better go quickly before the time comes any closer."

He seized that reprieve.

"It's not yet?"

"Not yet."

"I'll try the radio again but I don't think he's anywhere he can be reached by that." Seton operated the set quickly, delicately. *"No. Doctor Adams is not here." "Not here." "Haven't seen him." "Try tridi reconstruction." "Sorry, Seton, not here."*

"I'll try the diggings, he's got to be there. Now take it easy." There was a line of sweat along Seton's forehead, curved, like a scimitar.

The inner airlock valve opened slowly under his pressure and he stepped through with a last look backwards before clamping his helmet ring shut. So like a tiny child setting out on his first day to school—she always had that thought when Seton left the dome, the effect heightened by the solemn play-acting ritual of the airlock. As the inner door closed the cycling light went a deep ruby and she could hear the shush and thrump of the pumps. She leaned across the crumpled bedclothes and switched on the radio again.

Seton's voice came muffled by static.

".....can you hear me?"

"Yes, Seton. I hear you. Don't be long."

"Go on, weaken my resolution."

"What's it like out there?"

"A picnic. There's a storm brewing. The massif even has a cloud cap which means we're in for some of what Mars calls weather. I'm going as fast as I can but the damned dust slithers all over the place. Give me the concrete pavements of Earth."

"You know you don't mean that. Where could you see

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what you're seeing now?"

"In a sensitheatre, that's where."

"Artificial, mechanistic, callous—" She stopped speaking, then, as pain cascaded. She must keep that out of her voice; Seton had enough to bear without that.

His answering grunt carried no conviction that she had made a point. "I'll give Adams something for bringing me out in this."

"He's going to have to come out in it," she said after a pause, when her body had joined itself together again.

"That's his job."

"Ah yes, his job. Part of the science you worship."

"I don't worship it, woman. Just because you're cluttered up with a back-to-nature movement doesn't mean that I'm a mad myopic scientist. I just happen to believe that science can do good—witness the state you've got me in by ignoring it."

"What sort of argument is that?" Her voice keened suddenly low and she doubled with the hacking pain. Faster, now. The plastic tumbler was cool and smooth under her feverish fingers.

"You all right?"

She managed to gasp: "Yes. I'm all right."

The pains flooded again, rolling surges that washed through her body and carried her senses swimming on the crest of vertigo. She tried to smile, and her teeth gritted with the effort. How much longer? Now that the time was almost here she wished frantically that Seton was with her. She should not have let him go. She should have gone to Earth. She couldn't face the event without him.

"Seton!"

"Yes? Is it—?"

"I'm—all—right." Her jaw muscles petrified and the perspiration slicked from her face, sallow and drawn.

"This damned wind. The storm's blowing up into a real stinker. I can hardly see where I'm going. I wonder whether Adams will be able to get out at all—but he will. I'll see he does." Seton's voice dipped and slurred through the rising static, all mingled with and mixed up by the roaring in her ears and the pain that hammered a grip of torment around her body.

Almost immediately afterwards it seemed she was lying half off the bed, the sheets caught round her body, the pain gone and a tiny, remote voice calling: *"Starship Polaris calling Mars. Come in please."*

She realized vaguely that she must have struck the radio in falling knocking it off frequency. In a burst of panic at being cut off from Seton she twiddled the knobs and brought in the loud drowning mush and staccato clamour of static. She thrust at the radio desperately.

*"Venus calling Ganymede ....Hallo Earth!....Asteroid*

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*MG8-9439 reported assaying eighty five percent U235.... Hallo Mars!...."Bonny babies demand Gloobo"....Sirian Ambassador pleased with progress....Hallo Mars!.... Hallo Mars!"*

She lay back weakly on the bed, too listless to care further. All alone. She was all alone to face her supreme ordeal. Strangely the pain had receded—temporarily, temporarily!—leaving her drifting on a rosy cloud of imaginings. She could not feel her body. It was cut off, remote. Seton was out there, in the Martian night, head down against the raging sand, trudging through the project domes looking for the doctor—he would come? He had to!

She knew now, acknowledged with the bitter taste of failure, that she should have gone to Earth, succumbed to the obstetricians and hypnotists, accepted the fact that women always had cool efficient scientific help when their time came.

Only this time she had rebelled, had called a halt to the inexorable automation of humanity. Struck a blow for womanhood. *If only it had not been so painful...*

Mars was a forgotten world. A hunting ground for the archaeologist seeking scraps of a past glory it had no relation to the present day. Today's wonder was out there among the stars, riding wings of flame carrying mankind's dreams throughout the galaxy. Mars was a dust hole, filthy, decadent, without purpose and entirely inhuman.

And it was on this world that she had chosen to spurn the science Earth offered—

"Seton!" She screamed as the pains tore at her again, sevenfold more terrible after their absence.

Then, with such an overwhelming feeling of horror that she was shocked into an utterly clear appreciation of her position—it began. This, of course, was the end. Quite calmly, allowing her body to act as it would, relaxing, she lay back to await that end. She would die. Why fight longer, when she had proved herself a failure, degrading the very thing she had fought for? *But she hadn't known what it would be like...*

Through the mists that swooned her eyes she saw the cycling light glow like some precious gem set in the forehead of some pagan god. *Too late...* The inner airlock valve opened. A spacesuit with the frost of cold dissipating in fantastic curlicues of exotic shapes bundled through, then Seton had removed his helmet and was stumbling towards her.

"Oh, my God!" he said. "My God!"

"It's no good, Seton—"

"Doctor Adams injured himself clearing the sand—he can't come!" Seton said

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wildly. A woman pushed past him, her face a mask covering a sick revulsion.

"I'll do what I can," she said chokingly. "What I can."

"Don't worry." Poor Seton. And this woman, too. She should have had the attendance of science, the trappings of mechanical childbirth: her foolish pride, fallen on the broken reed of her body at the first onslaught of nature, had failed so easily. Strangely, Seton did not mirror her sentiments. He was fumbling with a dusty object. He turned towards her, his face radiant with hope and belief.

"Look," he said hoarsely, offering the thing for her to see. "Look. This is the thing that was buried in the sand. Doctor Adams got it out with the aid of a bulldozer and the wind. See—it is a gift to us from the old people who lived here."

She tried to see clearly through the mist and pain.

"This has been buried under the sand of Mars for unknown thousands of years," Seton said. "And we find it today, this day of all days, as though it had been laid by especially for us. The wonder of that we can't begin to understand. But I can understand what you wanted to do, your distrust of science—and this is a token, from the forgotten past, to tell us that we need a new belief, a visionary welding of all our pasts and the scientific promise of the future."

Through the pains that now came in regular and rapid strokes she looked bemusedly at the ancient Martian artifact.

"Fight," Seton was saying in words stronger than a pra[illegible] "Fight. You'll be all right, you have this to do now not only for us—but for the many poor ancient dead Martians.

She saw the Martian thing dug from the sand and she tried to speak, tried to tell Seton that she understood, that she would fight. Her words were very faint and quivering.

"I will," she said. "I—see—it. A cradle."

"From the dust, a cradle for our child," said Seton very gently.

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# one touch of terra

*by ... HANNES BOK*

**Maybe they *had* been bad mannered—accepting things of her—but who was to guess the Martian would interfere?**

"LISTEN, Elmer!" Horseface Smith told his gwip. "What's that racket ahead—yellin', shootin', or both?"

Elmer obediently stopped and cocked his duck-head in the direction of Finchburg, then nodded sagely, if somewhat ambiguously. He was a pack animal of the sort commonly used by psithium-prospectors on Venus, now that interplanetary travel was commonplace, and he was almost as intelligent as a human.

Despite his size—he was nearly as large as a terrestial horse—he must have had a dash of flying-squirrel blood, since when in a hurry gwips were apt to bound off the ground, flattening their plump bodies in a flying-squirrel glide which took them thirty to fifty feet per jump.

But at present Elmer wasn't able to do any bounding. His saddlebags were sagging with samples of ore, and he had all he could do just to walk.

Horseface clunked his heels

*Hannes Bok, who has been part of the world of Science Fiction and Fantasy for so many years, tells the touching story of Trixie and her dandelions, in the little mining camp on Venus, and how one of them th'ar Martians tried to do her—and the citizens of Finchburg—wrong.... Of course Goreck was just giving Trixie the runaround. All he was really after was her dandellions...as you would have been.....*



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on Elmer's sides, urging him up the stony hillside. They gained the summit and craned down at Finchburg, only half a mile below. Like most of the mining-settlements scattered sparsely over the vast Venus deserts, it consisted of scarcely a dozen buildings, none of them new, but all in reasonably good repair. If it is true that a town speaks for its inhabitants, Finchburg plainly declared that while its people might be down on their luck, but they hadn't lost hope.

"Looks like Trixie is blowing her jets," Horseface speculated, and Elmer dipped his broad bill in agreement. "Wonder what's eating her? She ain't acted human for months!"

Elmer cocked an inquiring eye on his master as if asking whether Trixie's behavior could possibly be considered gwippish. He decided not, and clucked sympathetically. He knew all about Trixie's idiosyncrasies. But then, who —or what—didn't?

Trixie O'Neill was the only woman within a thousand miles of the Venus Flats, and furthermore, the only terrestial woman. She wasn't young nor beautiful. She was in her middle fifties, gaunt, coarse, and had a wooden leg.

She'd come to Finchburg thirty years ago at the height of the psithium rush. She'd been young and pretty then, and desperately in love with her prospector-spouse Mike O'Neill. Mike had been a roistering giant, but he hadn't lasted long on Venus. The acid dust had eaten his lungs away, and in less than a year he'd been laid to rest down in an abandoned mine.

Almost immediately the veins of psithium had petered out. The mine-owners closed the shafts and took away their expensive equipment imported nut-by-bolt by rocket from Earth. Finchburg became a ghost-town. All the miners except for die-hards like Horseface had moved far away to the more promising strikes of Satterlee, Guzil Banks and Storington.

But Trixie remained at Finchburg. "My Mike's buried here, ain't he? Awright—where he stays, I stay!"

And she went on doggedly doing Mike's work until a cave-in crushed one of her legs, after which she set up a hostelry which was a one-woman service-bureau—she washed the miners' clothes, served their meals, kept their books, sold supplies to them and most of all kept up their morale. She provided the woman's touch, and the men adored her.

But the touch which they worshiped abjectly was of Terra itself—half of a blistered blast-tube filled with Terrestial soil and growing genuine Terrestal dandelions, rather scrubby and colorless ones, but from good old Ter-

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ra just the same.

When you thought you'd choke on one more whiff of the bitter Venus-dust, when you remembered the green lushness of Terra and wished you were back there, knowing you could never find enough psithium to pay your passage—then you went to Trixie's place, looked at her dandelions and maybe touched your finger to the dirt in which they grew—and you went away feeling better somehow. You'd been home again for a little while.

And if anybody saw a tear in your eye, he looked the other way. Because maybe tomorrow he'd be doing the same.

Why, there hadn't been a Mercurian in camp for years. They were afraid to come here ever since the earthmen had run out of town that one who'd got drunk on *vhubi,* upset the tube and tried to trample the plants.

No man, you didn't treat Trixie or her dandelions lightly. They were sacred.

"Hey," Horseface asked Elmer, "is that a rocket down there? A rocket—in Finchburg?"

Elmer peered forward and said, "Wak, wak!" in a meshed-gears voice, meaning yes.

"A rocket!" Horseface marvelled. "Maybe it's visitors from Terra! Or maybe it's news of a new strike! Geejup, Elmer! Time's a-jettin'!"

They started down the hillside's hairpin turns. The shouting grew more strident, and at times Horseface heard the raucous yowl of blaster-guns.

Celebration!

"Yippity!" Horseface bellowed, firing his own gun in the air.

But it turned out to be anything but a celebration. Horseface rushed Elmer into the community stable, unhooked the saddle-bags, dropped the stall-bar, and ran toward Trixie's place, "The Pride of Terra".

Every man in the camp was waiting at the door, and waiting vociferously. The comments mingled into an indistinguishable babble. A few miners were loitering around the rocket, a small two-seater, like mice cagily inspecting a new and baffling trap. Horseface recognized it by the device emblazoned on one of its doors—a yellow sunburst on a grey square, the insignia of United Mars.

The rocket belonged to Thurd Goreck, the Martian. Goreck hadn't been in town for years. He and his fellows had their diggings over at Saturday Wells, "Saturday" for short, in the west. What, Horseface wondered, possibly could have brought him here?

Since Horseface was a little below average height,

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he couldn't see over the heads of the crowd. He raced up the steps of an old ruin opposite Trixie's establishment. A shrieking beam from a blast-gun fired at random just missed him and scorched the wood overhead.

He heard Trixie's bark: "Stop it, boys, do you hear me? Somebody's likely to get hurt!"

She was standing in her doorway, a big sculpturesque woman with her feet planted solidly wide and her red fists on her broad hips. Her face was square and rough-hewn as a man's, the skin leathery from years of weathering. She'd thrown her blue lace scarf around her shoulders, the scarf that Mike O'Neill had given her on their first anniversary. Her crystal earrings dangled under her cottony hair—a bad sign. Trixie never put on her shawl and earrings unless thinking of leaving town.

Thurd Goreck lounged against the door-frame beside her. Like most Martians, he was tall and spindle-legged, large-chested, big-nosed and equipped with almost elephantine ears. He displayed quite a paternal solicitude whenever he looked at Trixie, but he sneered openly at the yelping crowd.

"Don't do it, Trix!" somebody roared above the din.

"You'll be sorry!" another warned.

Still another wanted to know, "Have you forgotten Mike?"

Then Horseface noticed that the other Martians from Goreck's settlement were ranged on either side of Trixie and Goreck, holding off the Finchburgers. It was they who were doing most of the firing—warning blasts over the crowd's heads.

"No," Trixie yelled, "I ain't forgotten Mike. He was a better man than the lot of you put together!"

Horseface whistled to Candy Derain, who turned and edged toward him. "What's up, Candy?"

"Man!" Candy reached at him. "You're just the one we need—Trixie's running away! You got to do something quick!"

"She's—huh?"

"Goreck's been lazing around town almost ever since you went out nugget hunting. He's taking Trixie to Saturday—going to set her up there in a new place. He was smart and waited till you weren't around, 'cause he knows you cut a lot of ice with Trix. You got to stop her—"

A roar from the crowd cut him short. It sounded as if all the men simultaneously had been jabbed with ice picks.

"Look!"

"No!"

"They're stealing our Terra!"

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"Trixie, you can't do this to us—you can't!"

"Ain't you got no heart at all?"

Horseface goggled, and groaned. Trixie and Goreck had stepped aside, making room for those Martians who were coming out with the blast-tube and its dandelions.

"H o w l i n g Gizzlesteins!" Horseface moaned. Then determinedly, "One side, Candy!"

He launched into the mob, shouldering, prodding and elbowing room for himself until he was out in front. A Martian significantly poked a blaster in his ribs.

"T r i x i e!" H o r s e f a c e bawled, "what do you think you're doing?"

She scowled more fiercely than ever. "You!" she thundered, pointing a muscular arm for emphasis. "You're a fine one, asking me that! I'm clearing out of here, that's what. I'm sick and tired of all you useless loafers preying on my good nature! Ain't it so, Goreck?"

The Martain nodded, grinning.

"For years and years," Trixie cried on, "you've been bleeding me dry! Trixie will you do this for me? Trixie will you do that? And I been doing it 'cause I felt sorry for you hopeless free-loaders, like as if maybe you was my own Mike. But now I'm through with you—and why? 'Cause you never treated me like no lady, that's why! You don't deserve a woman's kindness, Goreck says, and he's right!"

The uproar was dying down, no doubt keeping the miners' spirits company.

"Maybe I ain't no raving beauty," Trixie continued, "but that don't mean I ain't no lady, see?" In her next remark she used questionable words of interstellar origin—it is doubtful if they could have been said to have enriched any language. "Why, you frownzley glorfels, you even swear in front of me! So I'm clearing out. I've more than paid my debt to Mike, Lord rest him."

As the groans began, she gestured airily. "Put the flowers in the rocket, lads!"

"But Trixie!" Horseface called, pushing a step ahead. The Martian's gun dug a trifle deeper into his side.

"Eassy doess it," the Martian admonished in his whistling accent.

Horseface cried, "We're your own people, Trixie! You can't ditch us for Martians!"

"My people are the people treating **me** with respect!" she retorted, and Horseface's long visage fell several inches longer.

Goreck's Martians slid the dandelion-container into the rocket's baggage compartment and stood back, forming

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a lane down which Goreck assisted Trixie with exaggerated politeness. Surely she should have seen that his smirk was purely one of triumph!

But she didn't. She swung along on her wooden leg, thrilled to the core, beaming coyly at Goreck and actually blushing. He handed her into the rocket, let her arrange herself comfortably, then went to the other side of the flyer and swung aboard.

He slammed the door shut and reached for the controls. He treated the assemblage to one last sneer so poisonous that even a coral snake would have flinched from it. Trixie leaned across him to thumb her nose—after all, Emily Post and Amy Vanderbilt had been dead for a century.

The Martian with his gun in Horseface's midriff stepped back and away. Horseface would have rushed after him, but Mouse Digby caught him from behind.

"Hold it, Horseface!" And more softly, "We been up to something—"

Goreck pulled the rocket's power-lever with a grand flourish. Nothing happened. He smiled sweetly at Trixie, shrugged and dragged on the lever again. Nothing happened. On the third try he nearly wrenched the stick from its socket. From one of the rocket's jets, as though torn from its very heart, came two feeble sparks and a mournful burp.

"We busted their feedline!" Digby chuckled.

Goreck, having gone thus far, was not minded to stop now. He sprang from the rocket, called something in Martian to his men, and several of them raced away. The miners cheered perhaps a shade precipitately and bore down on the rest. The gun-toting Martians filled the air with frantic warning blasts and were swept down before they could turn their weapons to more practical use. The miners reeled around the rocket, swaying it as they clubbed the Martians with their own guns.

Goreck backed them away with well-laced blasts near their toes—what was known as "the quick hotfoot" since it turned the ground molten. He maneuvered himself with his back to his ship, his men breaking free and joining him.

Trixie clambered out seething with wrath. "You brakking chadouzes!" she howled brandishing a brawny fist. The men subsided sheepishly silent. She was accustomed to having her way, and they were accustomed to letting her have it. It had proved the best policy in the long run.

"Look at you, brawling and trying to keep me from having the one thing I want

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more than anything else—being treated lady-like! You think I got any sympathy for you when you act like this? You can't keep me here no longer, and you might as well realize it—and leave me go!"

They muttered angrily, but there was nothing to do except surrender. Horseface didn't bother to sheathe his gun—he threw it down in the dust. Mouse Digby, who'd been so elated over the stalling of the rocket, turned away and burst into tears.

The men were driven farther back as Trixie's supply-jeep snorted up to the rocket, driven by those Martians to whom Goreck earlier had shouted. They leaped down and assisted their fellow in transferring the dandelions from the rocket to the jeep.

"Dissable my sship, will you?" Goreck asked, grinning foxily. "Well, as we Martians say, there are plenty of ways to cook a gnorph!"

He snapped his fingers to one of his big-eared breed. "Phorey, you drive the jeep over to Ssaturday." Trixie started toward the jeep and he halted her—very courtously, of course. "No, my dear lady, we will let the jeep go firsst. Then we can be certain that nobody follows after it to rob you of your lovely flowerss. We will leave later."

The jeep chugged away. Trixie was very red-faced and unable to look at her erstwhile Finchburg admirers. Perhaps, Horseface hoped, she was relenting. But if she were, Goreck knew how to prevent it.

"Ssuch clods, to sstare sso at a lady!" he purred, and Trixie glared relentlessly at the men who had adored her so long—and apparently, so vainly.

Since Goreck's rocket was damaged beyond immediate repair, he rode off with Trixie on the town borer, a community-owned tractor equiped with a giant blaster and used in boring mine-tunnels. It was not intended for general travel and rumbled away very slowly, kicking up a great deal of dust. The other Martians had come on gwips, which they now mounted, then made off in a hurry.

"You'll get your borer back when I get my rocket back!" Goreck called from the wake of dust.

The Finchburgers stayed as they were, every spine an S of dejection.

"With Trixie gone," Candy Derain mourned, "there ain't no use our staying here. We'll all starve!"

Baldy Dunn said, "Maybe we was bad-mannered accepting things off of her, but I always meant to pay her back as soon as I found me

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some psithium. If I'd of thought—"

Horseface said, "Of course Goreck is just giving Trixie the runaround. All he's really after is her dandelions, 'cause he knows what they mean to us. He'll keep 'em till we go to his diggings to work for him, that's what! He'll charge us real money every time we want to touch 'em—and where are we going to get money? It's like he's holding 'em for ransom!"

He set his jaw. "Well, we ain't going to let him get away with it! When Trixie finds out what a nopper he is, she'll be sorry, sure—but she won't never come back here on account of she's too proud! She'll just stay in Saturday being Goreck's slave, her poor heart meanwhiles busting—and I ain't going to let her!"

He started briskly for the stable, the others hesitantly trailing along. "I'm getting on Elmer and going after her. Dandelions be desubricated, I'm going to save Trixie in spite of herself!"

But it seemed that everybody was having that identical idea at once. Not all of them owned gwips, so the party of rescuers set off on a peculiar assortment of vehicles—Candy on his vacuum-cup bicycle meant for scaling precipices, Baldy Dunn and several others on pick-wielding ore-cars, some on the psithium-detectors, and Digby on the mowing-machine which cut and baled grasses for the feeding of the gwips. About a third of the expedition had to go afoot.

In no time at all, Horseface and the other gwip-riders had far outstripped the clumsy machines and the pedestrians. As Elmer soared toward Saturday in forty-foot bounds, Horseface called to the rider abreast of him:

"Wasn't that Martian driving Trixe's jeep Phorey Yakkermunn? Yeah? Kind of thought so! Remembered him from way back when the rush was on," he mumbled to himself. "Seemed a little crazy even then, and guess he had to be, to go and turn against us what used to be his buddies. Elmer, for the love of Pete, space your jumps—you're beating the breath out of me!"

He came to a fork in the road and turned left, following the borer's tracks. Then he halted, letting the other gwips overtake him. They had started after Trixie too late. A swathe of sip-flowers had moved in across the road.

"Might as well try to swim through space to Terra!" Horseface lamented. "Blast them zips!"

But it wouldn't have done him much good if he had blasted them.

The zips were pretty

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things, something like Terrestial tiger-lilies—brilliant orange cups on tall green stems. They grew very thickly, and had been named, because of their incredibly swift lift-cycle. In five seconds they would zip up from the ground as sprouts, attain full green growth, blossom, produce seed, fall withering and scatter the seed which in another five seconds would do the same thing over again.

Nobody possibly could wedge through their rank masses. If anyone tried, and were somehow to reach their midst, he would find himself being tossed up and down at five-second intervals as though being hazed on a blanket.

The zips traveled whichever way the wind carried their seeds—which happened right now to be away from Saturday. If the salt plains and chains of vertical peaks had not checked them, they might have choked the whole of Venus centuries ago.

Horseface blinked at them, dismayed. The other men also blinked, since the continual change from bare earth to green stems to orange blooms and back to bare earth again took place in five snaps of the fingers, like the winking of an illuminated sign.

Elmer helpfully tried to eat them, but they vanished in decay even as his beak closed over them. And they stretched for miles and miles.

"Awrk!" He spat them out and shrugged discouragedly, almost hurling Horseface off the saddle.

"Guess we got to detour," Horseface sighed. They skirted the encroaching zips and ran smack into a sheerly perpendicular cliff. While they were wondering what to do next, Candy purred up on his vacuum-cup bicycle.

"At least I can ride up and over," he said, switching gear. He shot up the cliff and out of sight, the suction-cups popping like a string of firecrackers.

"You fool, come back here!" Horseface bawled, but Candy was out of earshot by then. "He's forgot there's nothing but rock-spires for miles and miles on the other side. He'll ride up and down for hours and get no farther forward than a hundred yards!"

He thumped his heels on Elmer's sides. "Gee-jup, Elmer—we'll have to try the other end of the zips."

Digby hailed him from the mower. "Should I try cutting a path through 'em?"

"How can you, when they die before your blade turns, and grow up before it can turn again? They'll bounce you to butter and shake the mower to bits."

"But we got to do something!"

By now the men on the

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detectors and ore-cars had caught up with the gwips, and the men on foot were within hailing distance.

"We're licked," Horseface mourned. "Ain't nothing we can do, except try the other end of the zips—and that's miles away. We're finished."

But they weren't. Elmer sneezed, exclaimed, "Yuk, yuk!" and jabbed his bill to indicate the cliffs.

Horseface sniffed. "Smells like rock-dust. If I didn't know better, I'd say somebody's been boring through the rock—hey! Trix and Goreck were riding on the borer! The zips must have cut them off the road like us! Come on, boys, look for the hole they made—boring a tunnel to cut past the zips!"

He didn't need to nudge Elmer. The gwip leaped toward the rocks, found the hole and slowed to a crouching walk into it. The passage was eight feet in diameter and reeking of blasted rock. After about a hundred yards it emerged into daylight but encountered zips *en masse* and so returned inward for several hundred yards more.

"That means Goreck wasted a lot of time tunneling," Horseface said happily. "Maybe we ain't so terrible far behind after all."

There was a shriek from the rear, and he reined Elmer. "What's that?"

"Dunno," the next man said, turning to look back.

They waited. One of the pedestrians came sprinting. "Hey, the detectors found a whopping vein of psithium—bigger than the one that started the old-time rush!"

"Huh, is that all?" Horseface demanded. "Forget it! We got to save Trixie!"

The borer had traveled faster than Horseface had imagined. He didn't come in sight of it until the party reached Saturday. It was just stopping in front of Goreck's tavern, "The Martian's Fancy". Goreck was handing Trixie down from it.

Saturday was a lot less of a ghost town than Finchburg. Maybe there were weeds in its main street, but every house had its occupants, and some had coats of paint besides.

Elmer braked at the borer, his claws deeply furrowing the dust. Horseface called, "Trix, come on back! We come to save you in spite of yourself!"

Goreck whistled, and a flock of his boys materialised on the porch of "The Martian's Fancy."

"Trouble, boyss! Sstand ready!"

Then he smiled at Horseface and the other Finchburgers. It was a masterpiece of insult. "I don't like blast-play or dangerouss fighting,

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but if necessary, I'll resort to it. You've no authority to argue, sso go before you get hurt. Trixie iss here because she wants to be here—no, my dear?"

He nudged her. She jumped, looked as though she was about to bat him one, then gulped and nodded. She couldn't look in the eyes of Horseface and his party.

Horseface laid his hand on his blaster-butt. "It don't make no particle of difference. Maybe you fooled Trix, but you ain't fooled us, so hand her over, see?"

Goreck twinkled jovially at his men in front of "The Martian's fancy". He said, "Horseface, I warn you—get back, and take your hand off your gun. As long as I have the dandelionss ssafe inside my headquarterss, I'm quite ssure that you won't dare try anything reckless—"

"Boss! Psst!" One of the Martians was beckoning nervously.

"What is it?" Goreck demanded testily. "Sspeak up! There'ss nothing to fear—we've got the whip hand."

"But, boss—"

Goreck dropped his own hand to his own gun. The Martian hastily piped, "The dandelionss! They didn't get here!"

"I —what— ulp!" Goreck spluttered, which made beautiful sense even if it wasn't coherent. He dived behind Trixie as though behind a rock, and whipped out his gun.

"Looking klambits!" Mouse Digby moaned. "The zips! They got Phorey and the jeep and the dandelions! Shook 'em to pieces!"

He pressed his mouth into a slit and started grimly forward. But Trixie's scream checked him.

"My dandelions! Gone! All gone! Just 'cause I wanted to be treated nice—"

Horseface said, "You see? That's what you get for being so foolish. And ain't us coming to fetch you kind of a compliment? It's sure took us a lot more effort than Goreck's sweet-talking did. You, Goreck, get out from behind a woman's skirts! That ain't no way for a gentleman to act!"

"Trixie, back up to the Fancy," Goreck snapped. "Hide me. Boyss," he squeaked, gesturing wildly, "let 'em have it!"

"No you don't! You ain't going to shoot my old pardners!" Trixie fumed, even as a number of rays from Martian blasters sang past. The Finchburgers ducked, not daring to shoot while Trixie was so near their targets.

She turned, swooped and had Goreck off the ground, high over her head and squawking. He didn't dare shoot her since she was his only hope of salvation, and

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the Martians didn't either.

They just stopped fighting.

Trixie walked Goreck over to Horseface and thumped him down on the dust. The rest of the Martians held a quick exchange of ideas limited strictly to gestures, and began to melt away from the scene.

"Fortune hunter! Deceiver!" Trixie bawled at Goreck who was already wretched enough with blasters poked in his face. "You promised me you'd do it all peaceful, and still you wanted to shoot my pardners! You treated me decent just to get my dandelions away from me! I been a fool," she sobbed at Horseface, grinding her fists in her eyes. She dropped her hands and snapped at Goreck, "And it was you what made me do it! I'll fix you for that! Out of my way, everybody!"

The Martians hiding in "The Martian's Fancy" and peeping from its windows let out a shriek as she started for the borer. They'd read her mind. They burst from the place like moths from an opened trunk, and instantaneously scattered all over the landscape.

"You boys watch Goreck," Trixie ordered the Finchburgers who had come on foot. "But you with the machines, come on—join the fun!"

The air not only was rent, but hamburgered as she turned on the borer's blast-ray full-strength and dragged it straight for "The Martian's Fancy". The mowing machine chopped up a few street weeds before it began to cut and bale the houses. The psithium detectors hopped like kangaroos against the flimsy walls, battering them down. Goreck's protests were inaudible in the clangor of smashing dwellings and the crackle of crumbling masonry. His tears of frustration and fury made tiny mudpies in the dust.

"I guess that'll show you how a lady ought to be treated," Trixie observed rather enigmatically, but with grim satisfaction, after having done to his town everything that the old Assyrian conquerers had bragged about—except perhaps the piling up of human heads. "Now give him a send-off, boys!"

But their blasts at his feet couldn't possibly keep up with him. Maybe it was merely dust, but he ran so fast he seemed to smoke from friction.

"I guess nobody's going to like me no more, after what I went and done—losing my dandelions," Trixie sighed. They had started homeward, and she was riding behind Horseface on Elmer. Most of the pedestrians were riding the borer.

Horseface said, "We love you more than ever, Trix.

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We had to lose you before we could see what fools we been."

Horseface went on, "Don't worry about the dandelions. For one thing, while we was going through that tunnel you and Goreck made, we found a whopping big vein of psithium—big enough to start another rush! Now we can all go back to Terra if we want to—or if we stay, you can build a whole blooming conservatory!"

Trixie stopped sobbing. Elmer rejoiced, because from her hiccoughs he had felt as if she and Horseface had been dancing on his back.

Horseface said, "And anyway, your dandelions ain't lost. I knew it when I came chasing after you to the fork in the road. Phorey Yakkermunn the Martian was driving your jeep. Don't you remember what we used to call him? 'Ears', that's what —'Ears' Yakkermunn, 'cause being a Martian and coming from a planet with rarefied air like there is on Mars, his ears had to be extra big so they could catch sounds."

"What's that got to do with my dandelions?"

"Phorey never could get used to the heavy air we got here on Venus. It makes sounds too loud and hurts his ears. So he still does like he used to, he stuffs them with cotton. Goreck told him to take the dandelions to Saturday, didn't he? But with all that cotton in his ears, you know where he took 'em? To Satterlee!"

"Are you sure?"

"Positive! After we took the fork in the road, we was following borer-tracks, not tire-marks!"

She threw her heavy arms around him, planting a kiss full on his lips. It not only made him squirm, but reminded him of Candy Derain's suction cup bicycle. Candy probably had traveled a hundred miles or so by now —straight up and down again —and actually couldn't have gained more than a hundred feet straightaway.

"You're so resourceful, Horseface," Trixie breathed, with constellations rather than mere stars in her eyes. "You remind me of Mike. And I'm going to reward you for all you've done. I'm going to marry you!"

Horseface didn't dare to groan. While Trixie clamped a loving paw on his own hand almost squeezing it to pulp, he wished fervently that he was alone on the far hills—anywhere but here—looking for psithium nuggets.

But Trixie always had her way, and she wasn't going to stop having it now.

"You're so masterful!" she wheezed.

And even Elmer, looking back over his shoulder, hung his head and sighed.

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# the satellite-keeper's daughter

*by ... MARK REINSBERG*

**It isn't advisable to get that gleam in your eye when you're out in space. It can lead to complications .....**

SEX AND space don't mix. And Mattapenny's *Galactic Guidebook* can't be trusted.

If you doubt either proposition, ask Bill Brack. It's hard to tell what he thought about women, but all space truckers used to look upon Mattapenny's little red book as a sort of interstellar Bible.

"Looking for a planet to stop over at?" they'd say. "Place to get good meals? Decent room for the night? You can't go wrong with Mattapenny!"

Brack did.

You see, the *Galactic Guidebook* lists Corbie as one of the five small fuel stations sharing the outermost orbit of the Dryodean planetary system. The latest edition still gives Hotel Eros two asterisks.

Now, two asterisks (**) is supposed to mean "Plain but fairly comfortable".

"Sure," says Brack, "the hotel may lack an up-to-date Dreamawake or a Time-conditioner, but at least you expect your room to have a Vibrobath and controllable gravity."

None of this at the Hotel Eros. Brack shakes his head

*Chicago's own Mark Reinsberg, associated with Shasta Publishers, the SF house, there, makes a first appearance in these pages with this quiet little story of a susceptible trucker—galactic style—who once swore by Mattapenny's otherwise so dependable GALACTIC GUIDEBOOK.*



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complainingly. "You sleep in a primitive 7/8G-bed. You wash yourself with old-fashioned magnetic water. And oxygen service costs 10% extra."

Some people ask: "Then why in the world did you stay there?"

"Had to," Bill answers. "I was hauling out of Dryod-7 with a cargo of deluplasm. Damn valuable stuff, consigned to Hesdin-2. Well, I'd figured the time a little wrong, and it left me with twelve hours to kill before our convoy jumped off. And you know how it is. I was facing three weeks of interstellar rations, and I had a sudden yen for nonsynthetic food. So I looked in the guidebook, and there was Corbie..."

Brack was disappointed from the start. When he sat at a table of the hotel restaurant and studied the menu, he saw it was all synthetics.

"Blast it!" he barked into the table phone, "haven't you anything else?"

"I understand how you feel, mister." It was a live human female voice that answered, not the usual robot. "Hold on. I'll come out and see if I can help you."

Through the kitchen door emerged a young girl, short and white-skinned, but very well proportioned.

"Outbound?" she queried. Her pretty face was clouded by an unhappy expression.

"Yes, and I wanted something with a little taste to it, a little substance."

"Such as what?" said the girl, tossing her long blond hair.

Brack looked at the girl carnivorously. "A steak."

She smiled sympathetically. "We haven't anything of that sort. Sorry." She stared at him with light blue eyes the color of moonstones. "How do you happen to land at this miserable place? Fuel?"

"I'm early for my convoy."

Brack stared at the girl's face and he could see it was the mask of some hidden, tragic emotion.

"You weren't thinking of staying at the Hotel Eros?" she inquired in a voice edged with repugnance.

"Well, I do have about twelve hours."

The girl was emphatic. "Take my advice, mister. Spend them in your ship."

A man's voice crackled over the table phone. "Esther!"

She looked startled. "Yes?" she said, leaning over the table to speak into the phone.

('Beautiful!' thought Brack. 'She must have some Earth-blood in her veins.')

The man's voice was angry, strident. "Don't gab with the customers!"

Esther stood up, a blush of embarrassment on her milky-white cheeks.

"Your order, please?" she said to Brack, stiffly.

The trucker put his big,

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brown-colored hand over the phone. "Who's that character?" he asked with distaste. "The boss?"

The girl nodded unhappily. "I didn't realize he was listening."

"Sounds like a tyrant." Brack uncovered the phone. "What's the closest thing you have to beefsteak?"

"Why don't you try some of our roasted pradolan? It's quite good," she added for the boss's benefit. "Specialty of the house."

"There's just one thing I want to know," said Brack. "Is it synthetic?"

The girl smiled sadly. "I'd do anything for some real food myself. I haven't left Corbie in seven years."

"What makes you stick around a place like this? Married?"

"No. My father owns the Eros."

"You're free, brown and twenty-one," said Brack somewhat inaccurately. "He can't make you stay if you want to leave."

Esther waved warningly at the table phone and Brack again covered it with his hand.

"Maybe he can't legally, but there's only one passenger ship between here and the planets every year, and they've refused me a ticket twice now."

"Sounds pretty rotten to me," said the trucker. "Well, what if you got married to some guy? Then he couldn't—"

A heavy-set white man, bald and bullet-headed, strode out of the kitchen and seized the girl roughly by the arm.

"Now I told you not to gab with the customers and I meant it!" he snarled. "You get back there in the kitchen where you belong!"

She tried to wrench free of his grip. "Take your hands off me!"

Slap! He batted her across the cheek with his open hand and she staggered from the blow. "No back talk, young lady! Now, git!"

The trucker half rose from his seat, his fists clenched, but it was over too quickly for him to intervene. And after all, he reflected later while eating the pradolan roast, the man was her father.

With some misgivings, Brack checked into the hotel. It was a tiny installation—perhaps nine or ten rooms. His own cubicle was a drab affair, with neither entertainment screen nor sleep-inducer.

He had just tested the 7/8G-bed with disgust when there was a buzz at the door. It was Esther, holding some linens.

"They have you doing everything around here," Brack said with empathy. "What are these?"

"Towels. You use them after you wash."

"Boy, this sure is ancient!"

Esther's eyes betrayed deep

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torment. "I know. I would do anything to get away from this place."

She put the towels in a rack. The trucker was lying on the bed, contemplating the girl's deft, graceful movements.

"Listen," he said, "why wait for a passenger ship? Why not arrange secretly with one of the cargo ships that stop here? I know if I was inbound—"

"Don't even say it!" she expostulated. "It's very kind of you, but certainly you've heard of the Pledge Act? My father could prosecute any cargo ship, no matter where it landed in the planets. You know, unlicensed transport of people."

She paused to look at herself in a mirror above the washstand. Brack's eyes were on her bare, marble-white shoulders, her finely sculptured bosom. She sighed.

"No, my only chance is to get away from the Dryodean System altogether. If I go to another star—where the Pledge Act wasn't even heard of—"

She brushed back her long blond hair with an unconscious gesture, like a maiden getting out of a degravity pool.

Brack said thoughtfully: "Esther, if you're really determined to get away from here, maybe I can help you. I'm taking a cargo to Hesdin. Your old man couldn't reach you there, or prove anything against me, either."

The girl's moonstone eyes flared up in hope, but she hesitated. "I don't have very much money. I couldn't make it worth your while, financially."

"That part is unimportant. The thing for you to consider is the situation on Hesdin-2. It's a new colony; life there is pretty primitive."

Esther waved at the room. "Any more so than here?"

Brack grinned. "Not much more. But then also, you've got to remember that it's a three-week trip. Pretty monotonous. Just the two of us."

She looked him in the eyes with understanding.

"I'd try not to get in the way."

They met in the middle of the night at Brack's ship. Working slowly, soundlessly, they opened a cargo case and removed enough unit boxes to make room for the girl.

Esther settled down in the container.

"I'm afraid that isn't too comfortable," Brack apologized, "but you'll only have to put up with it four hours. I take off at seven."

"That's all right, Bill. Just so there's no delay. My father expects me to open the dining room at seven."

"We'll be ten million miles away before he misses you," said Brack. He put the top on loosely, faking the straps

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across the cover, so the girl could breathe.

In his room again, Brack lay with arms folded under his head, thinking honeyed thoughts. He would have Esther's pleasant company. His cargo was a valuable one. Two-thirds of the receipts on Hesdin-2 would represent sheer profit. Perhaps it would be enough to establish him in some kind of a local freight business. Esther could make a man a wonderful partner. Lovely, delectable girl!

He reminded himself that they were not safely away from Corbie yet, and he passed the remaining hours in the Hotel Eros sleeplessly anxious.

Brack delayed going to his ship until the last minute before takeoff time. Then, as he half-feared, he saw a customs officer standing beside the airlock.

The trucker tried taking the offensive. "Gosh, I'll be late for my convoy if I don't leave right away."

"Sorry, sir, but I'll have to inspect your ship." He was a burly, tough-looking character in pale green uniform, blocking the doorway with a flatfooted, wrestling stance.

Brack sensed that a contest of fists might not end in his favor. He unlocked the entrance and waved the official in with reluctance. "Take a look, but I've already gone through customs on Dryod-7. I can show you my clearance."

"This isn't customs exactly," said the man. "We're searching for a person."

"A person?" (The old man sure kept a close watch on his daughter.) "I'm the only person aboard this ship."

The customs official remained polite. "Yes, I understand that, sir. But Mr. Eros' daughter is missing. He thinks she may have stowed away on your ship."

"Impossible! I had the ship locked."

They stepped into the pilot's cabin, a tetrahexahedron-shaped room crowded with multiple-monitor screens of an astrogation-computer. Brack threw the ignition switch to start the buildup in the ship's nuclear engine.

"What is your cargo?" the customs man demanded.

"Fifteen cases of deluplasm," said Brack with unfeigned anxiety.

The official debated with himself. "I believe it would be best if I opened the cases."

Brack looked at his watch with desperation. "But we don't have time! That would take at least a half-hour! I'd miss the other ships! And you know what that would mean. I couldn't navigate interstellar space alone, not at a hundred times the speed of light. I'd be stuck here in the Dryodean System until the next fleet left. That might be months!"

He grabbed the official's arm. "Please, fellow, give me a break!"

The customs man consid-

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ered. "Well, since the ship was locked, it does seem unlikely that the girl has hidden herself here. I certainly wouldn't want you to lose your convoy."

Brack smiled in relief and started the rocket engine secondaries.

"Thanks a million."

"But just to protect me in case the girl has run off somewhere—I want you to sign this form."

Brack felt a twinge of suspicion, but more of a twinge of haste. "Sure. What kind of a form is this?"

"It simply says that I inspected each case in your presence and found the contents identical with your bill of lading. This girl has made several attempts to leave Corbie in the past. This is my protection in case she's finally succeeded."

The customs officer made the s l i g h t e s t perceptible wink. Brack signed.

He took off immediately. He was already ten minutes late. He had to blast at top speed for the next hour, continually correcting his navigation. There was no time to go back and let Esther out of the cargo room. He had to remain at the controls, feeding data into the computer, modifying course as solutions flashed on the screens.

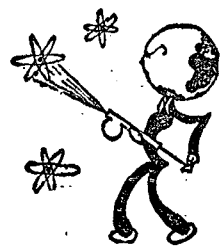
Finally, Brack sighted the convoy and maneuvered into pattern just as the fleet was dematerializing into supraspace. He set his ship on pantagraph-automatic with the lead navigator, then hastened to the cargo hold.

Esther was not there. Neither were ten of the fifteen cases of deluplasm. Two-thirds of his cargo had been hijacked.

It was of course pointless for Brack to turn around and raise hell on Corbie. With the waiver he'd signed for the customs officer, he'd only look ridiculous. All he could do was continue to Hesdin-2 with his one-third cargo. At least he'd break even on the trip; Esther and her co-workers had been that considerate.

No, sex and space don't mix.

And it's high time that Mr. Mattapenny deleted the Hotel Eros (**) from his little red guidebook.



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# the shrine

*by ... WALT SHELDON*

THE AMERICAN stopped to rest, to daub his brow, and he withdrew for a moment into the mottled shade beside the trail. Ahead the mountain rose and became blue with distance. A figure in a saffron robe moved down the trail, and toward him.

"A woman," said his lips without sound. His eyes clocked surprise.

He was Edward Blair. He worked for the English-language Tokyo Tribune. It was as good a paper as any to work for when your career had been interrupted twice by war. You could coast on the Tokyo Trib. You could let things not matter.

Now he watched the woman. She walked with a gliding motion; though her steps were tiny and downhill, her shoulders moved in an even line. They were small shoulders and, as she neared, he saw above them an oval face, a beautiful and simple face with golden skin and eyes of dark velvet. He stepped out of the shade and smiled as she came upon him.

**Naito smiled. "You are still in the grip of time, Mr. Blair. Spend some with us and you will slip a little from its tyranny."**

*We have said on a number of occasions that there are a number of things and forces which dwell in the shadows of this Fantastic Universe of ours. And in the mountains.... Walt Sheldon tells the story of Edward Blair, reporter on the English language TOKYO TRIBUNE, who, much to his disgust, is sent to interview the monks at the Hataka shrine. After all, why waste time on these magic tricks? This is of course not Science Fiction. And is it Fantasy? Who of us can really say?*



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She showed no surprise, and he was startled to hear her speak good English.

"You are Mr. Blair."

"Why, yes. Yes, I am."

"I am sent to meet you. I am sorry to be late."

"That's all right."

"I will show you the way to the shrine."

"Well, thanks. But they said in the village it was easy to find. Just follow the trail to the top of the mountain."

"But I will take you."

"A pleasure, believe me," said Ed Blair, and grinned.

And now they walked together, she effortlessly, like silk waved in air. He seemed to walk more easily, too. He no longer panted. The long grasses, the persimmon trees and the bamboo groves went by.

He carried a press camera and a bag full of bulbs, but they no longer seemed heavy.

"Nice of them to send you," he told the girl.

She laughed. There are tinkling strips of glass hung in a Japanese garden in summer for their cool sound. She laughed like this. "Naito-san has reason for sending me. He always has reason."

"Naito-san?"

"He is Obo—the high priest, you say in English. He taught me English."

"And your name?"

"Yuki."

"That can mean snow or flower," said Blair.

"You know Japanese writing?"

"No, but I heard it somewhere." He laughed. Then he mopped his brow again. "Hot, isn't it?"

"We must have a breeze," she said.

A breeze sprang up.

"Well! You certainly ordered that one!"

"Naito-san said to make you comfortable." She said this quite seriously.

They walked some more, and he forgot the concidence. He watched the girl, admiring her effortless walk. Presently he said, "Well, I'm going to enjoy this visit, anyway."

"Enjoy?"

"I didn't think I would at first. I thought it was all just another crazy idea of Murdock's. He's the managing editor. I told him he was crazy to send me out here to the mountains and waste three days getting a brightener for page two."

"I do not understand all of what you say."

"These magic tricks the monks do. What I mean is, they're interesting, but not big, important news. We call a story like this a feature. We don't usually take a lot of time or trouble with it."

"But they are not magic tricks. They are more."

"Well—all right. I understand how you feel."

He wondered what her place in the Hataka Shrine

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might be. Priestess perhaps. Except that you couldn't use western words for these things. The ideas were different. But she was beautiful—that was the same in any language!

They reached the shrine in some twenty minutes of climbing, and because of the breeze, and because his feet had suddenly become light, he was not exhausted. The shrine was in a flat place near the top of the mountain. It was not imposing: it had no huge tori, or entranceway, like a Shinto shrine and there was little elaborate gilding or carving. Inside there was a kind of chancel with flowers, incense holders and hanging prayers and mottoes. There were low buildings off to one side, and the land about them was a carefully made garden, cool and withdrawn, and both men and women in robes of gray or saffron or blue walked about this garden quietly.

Then an old man, bald and with skin like saddle leather came forward. He was old, but his eyes were more; they were ageless, like black sky on a cloudless night. He wore silk. He smiled, but with restraint, then offered his hand, western style. "Welcome, Mr. Blair. I am Naito. We are glad to have you here."

"Thank you. How do you do."

"You'll want a hot bath, I think...and then a little rest. After that we can eat together, and talk."

"Well—thanks—but actually I'd like to get the story, then go on back to the village again. The last train leaves about six."

"But you must stay longer. Surely."

"No, I really ought to get back to the office. Took me a day and a half to get here, after all."

Naito smiled and shook his head. "You are still in the grip of time, Mr. Blair. Spend some with us and you will slip a little from its tyranny."

"You're very kind, Mr. Naito. But—well, you have your world and I have mine. Time's important in mine. If you could just show me some of these tricks you do—"

"Ah, tricks! Tricks!" Naito still smiled, but Blair felt the anger radiate from him, like heat. "You want to see our tricks, then?"

"Well, that's what I came here for—"

"I told Mr. Murdock," said Naito, drawing his robe more closely about him, "to send a man who would understand. Someone who was not all western...who had a little of the oriental viewpoint."

Blair laughed. "Murdock would think that about me. Because I show a little interest in things oriental—because I don't think a deep freeze or an eight cylinder

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juke box on wheels is the greatest thing in the world. Nevertheless, Mr. Naito, I come from a middle-class American background, and my viewpoint is still pretty western. Nor am I one of these odd intellectual types who seem to be ashamed of it."

"There is hope," said Naito. "I am glad you came."

Blair took folded copy paper and a pencil from his pocket. "But shall we get down to business now? First, let me get your full name, and where you come from, and all that. Then the exact name of your sect here, or whatever it is."

Naito seemed amused.

Yuki stood by with great poise. Blair glanced at her and thought yes, flower. When she stands she grows quietly, like a flower.

Then Natio gave the facts. He was Japanese, but had lived in Canada and the United States for some years. He held a doctor's degree from Waseda University in Tokyo, and he had taken post graduate courses in America. He had studied Buddhism in China, Tibet and India. He had drawn from many of the other sects, and founded his own, calling it *Koto*, using the character that meant "event" or "circumstance."

"Yes," said Blair politely. "Now what about these magic tricks of yours?"

Murdock had said there would be magic tricks. Friends of Murdocks, tourists, had come across the Hataka Shrine and had seen them. Murdock had sent Blair with his Speed Graphic to get the story. The Americans of the security forces, who supported the Tokyo Trib, liked these features very much. From them they became experts on Japan without the annoyance of going too far afield from their wellstocked clubs or comfortable billeting areas.

Naito, the high priest, sighed.

"I will do it the cheap way, then."

He took Blair to another corner of the garden. Yuki followed, gliding. Here water trickled from rocks into a small pool where black and orange carp swam. Naito watched the pool for a while, and presently the water stopped running. A moment later it began to seep upward toward the cleft in the rock.

"There," said Naito.

"What's this supposed to prove?" asked Blair.

"Water running uphill," said Naito. "Is that enough of a trick for you?"

"I don't get it."

"All right. Let's try something else." He moved off, swiftly, angrily, shucked the *geta* from his feet, entered

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one of the cottages, and a movement later returned. He held a child's rubber balloon. "It's round," he said, holding it up for Blair to see.

"Okay. A round balloon."

Naito blew it up. Instead of inflating to a round shape it extended itself into a long, bannana like form. Then he blew it up again, and this time shapes like fingers came out of it at various points.

"Well?" said Blair.

"You still don't see, do you? Tell me, what do you *want* me to do."

"Oh, the water illusion, and the balloon thing are clever enough—I don't have any idea how you do it," said Blair, "but the tricks, well, they lack drama, if you see what I mean. No flash. I'd like a good visual trick. One I can really photograph."

Now Naito seemed to seethe inside. He breathed quickly, heavily as he talked. "What will you have?" he said. "What will you have, Mr. Blair? I can do the Hindu rope trick, I can fascinate snakes, and I can put Yuki in a box and saw her in half. Is that the kind of thing you might understand?"

"Well, it ought to be something sort of new," said Blair.

"New," repeated Naito. "Something new. Very well, then. But first you must understand. This time you *must* understand. We will have tea."

They sat upon grass mats in one of the cottages over cups of pale green tea. Yuki sat beside Blair, and her shoulder touched him now and then. When this happened he found it difficult to concentrate on what Naito was saying.

"Your western science," said Naito, "is only beginning to learn what we know. And from a totally different viewpoint. Your Dr. Norbert Wiener has beautifully clarified the essential fallacy of the Newtonian viewpoint, that nature acts and reacts according to rigid laws. He shows, instead, that it is highly *probable* nature will do this. Probable enough so that for everyday purposes one may depend on it. Do you follow me, Mr. Blair?"

"I'm afraid I'm not very much up on my science."

"Well, I'm trying to explain it in terms a westerner will understand. You saw a quantity of water run uphill. It was not an illusion, Mr. Blair. It is highly probable that water will not run uphill, but it is also possible that, under certain circumstances, it may. And as for the balloon—tell me, why does gas exert equal pressure in every direction?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"But you must remember, surely. The molecules of a gas fly about in random directions. They exert force

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upon the walls of any container the gas happens to be in. Entropy—or the universal tendency toward disorder that Wiener speaks of—keeps an average of them exerting force in *all* directions. So the pressure remains equal in all directions, and we can measure it, and be certain, reasonably certain, that the next man who measures it will get the same result."

"I remember Boyle's law."

"Exactly. And Boyle's law, or Ohm's laws, or Newton's laws, or anyone else's laws are based on probability—nearly overwhelming probability. But what happens in the rare, almost unthinkable case where every factor does not act according to the most pragmatic law of all—the law of averages?"

"We're getting way up in the clouds now," said Blair.

"Please try to see it."

"Yes, please do." Yuki touched his arm.

"I blew up a round balloon," said Naito. "The gas should have exerted equal pressure in every direction. But something happened to the law of averages. Most of the molecules flew in *one* direction, and the balloon assumed a long shape. It was one chance in—in a number I cannot even express, it is so huge. Yet, it was still possible."

"Now, wait a minute, Dr. Naito," said Blair. "You're a very nice fellow and I don't really want to offend you, but honestly, I've been around, and a lot of people have tried to fool me with double-talk. Not as learned as yours, but the principle's the same. Now look, why don't you make some fine visual trick for me that I can photograph? Then I can get out of here."

"Oh, dear," said Naito.

"Now what's the trouble?"

"This isn't what I wanted at all. I hoped Murdock's reporter would be—well, sensitive. You see, the time has come to spread what we've learned, to find new supporters. I'd hoped to get a few this way."

"How about my trick?" asked Blair.

"Very well. Come into the garden again."

In the garden he spoke rapidly for a few moments to Yuki in Japanese. Then he turned to Blair. "Watch her. Have your camera ready."

"I'm ready."

Yuki, a few feet away from them, closed her eyes and at first began to turn slowly in one spot. Her step, to begin, was a slow pirouette, then gradually she began to revolve more rapidly. Presently she was turning so fast that Blair could scarcely believe it. He would not have believed before that the finest professional dancer could pirouette with this speed. He began to

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take pictures. He was so busy taking pictures that at first he did not notice the blurred shape that was Yuki, whirling, begin to disappear. Then this became apparent to him. He stared, open-mouthed, and Yuki vanished from sight.

"My gosh—that's terrific!" he said. "Where did she go?"

"She's still right there," said Naito.

Blair walked to the spot, felt nothing; he moved his hands about where the girl had been spinning. "She's not there," he said, returning. "That's a honey, though. You could make a nice living back in the states out of that one alone."

Naito sighed.

"Now, how do you bring her back?" asked Blair, and kept his camera ready.

"Presently, presently," said Naito. "I think she distracts you, and now, while you can't see her, you must try once more to understand. You must know why I do these tricks, as you call them."

"All right. Why? Or better yet—how?"

"You in the west would call it psychokinesis — mentally controlling matter. Your conventional table lifting of spiritualists is an example. So is the phenomenon of people who seem to be able to will dice to fall a certain way. And in your literature—well, Moses and the Red Sea is the first thing that comes to mind. Actually, your Dr. Rhine and some others have discovered some evidence that seems to support, to the western, mind, the existence of psychokinesis. But you can never really understand it with western, scientific thinking methods. I cannot even explain it clearly in your terms."

Blair smiled a little. "I think you could explain it all logically enough, if you really wanted to. But, actually, I don't blame you for not wanting to give a trick like that away."

"This is no trick, and it is not what you understand as logical," said Naito, shaking his head stubbornly. "I know that you must have logic to understand; you crave the drug of logic. You want everything labeled, and explained in terms of cause and effect. You cannot conceive that cause and effect may be one—or indeed exist independently. And do you see what this way of thinking has led to?"

"What has it led to?" Blair tried to be patient.

"You have developed a huge, powerful monstrous science of cause and effect. You fly at vast speeds, you build huge edifices, you change the face of the earth with dams and canals, you will soon no doubt escape the gravity of the earth itself and reach outer space, and you are quite

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capable of making an explosion big enough to destroy the earth itself. It is awesome. You, indeed, are awed by the monster you've created. Now you begin to worship it. Now the scientific method becomes the only method for anything. Now you cannot understand, nor can you tolerate anything that does not show logic and exhibit a clear pattern of cause and effect."

"I think I'd better get along and catch that train, now," said Blair. "Would you mind producing the young lady again? I'd like to say goodbye to her."

"You haven't heard all of my story yet."

"I think I've heard enough."

Naito nodded at the spot where the girl had apparently disappeared. "Watch," he said. Presently a blur came into sight, and as its velocity decreased he saw that it was the girl, spinning now in the opposite direction. He took more pictures. It was not long before she stood there, no longer moving, and seemingly calm and not exhausted. She opened her eyes, saw Blair, and smiled.

"I still say it's a great trick," said Blair.

"It's only the beginning," said Naito. "We can do these few cheap tricks you've seen, but they're only exercises in control. We are still learning. Some day we—or more likely our descendants—will be able to control most of the entropy of the universe. By willing it, we will be able to halt the explosion of a star, change the orbit of the moon, reverse the tides. Then, more important, we can freeze a soldier's bullet in his rifle before he fires it, and we can keep any nuclear bomb ever from explodng. Then we can make order. Then we can properly control mankind itself, and give it the order it has sought so long. Now you know why I am here, and what I am trying to do."

"You're not really so different, then, are you?" said Blair.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Never mind. I have to leave now. It doesn't matter."

Naito looked at him with a dark, porcelain eye. "I sense in you an enemy, Mr. Blair."

"Yes," said Blair. "Perhaps you're right."

Naito looked about, glancing at some of the others strolling about the shrine. For a moment Blair thought the man would try to forcibly detain him. Blair stiffened himself and hardened his muscles; magic or no magic, the old bald fellow would have a scrap on his hands if he tried any kind of violence.

Naito then said abruptly, "But not a powerful enemy, Mr. Blair. You will make fun of us in your newspaper article, I suppose. But it won't

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really change anything. You may as well leave now, if you are so anxious to go. Yuki will take you down the mountain again."

"Thank you for your time and t r o u b l e," said Blair, stiffly, politely.

Again he was on the trail, descending, and the shrine and the mountain top were moving back into the blueness of the sky. The girl walked a little ahead. He watched her for a while, still admiring her, and presently he spoke.

"He knew what I meant," he said.

She turned her head slightly. "Naito—san?"

"Yes. Of course I don't believe any of his double-talk—but if I did, I would be his enemy. He saw that."

"Why would you be his enemy?"

"Because he is a tyrant."

"Naito-san? A tyrant? That is a bad ruler, is it not—a tyrant? Naito-san is not like this."

"But he is. Every tyrant that ever lived began with the hope of controlling mankind for its own good. For what *he* decided was its own good."

"I don't know," said Yuki. "I don't understand all you say."

"How long have you been with Naito?"

"Since I was a child. He took me when my parents died. He has been like a father. He says I must learn, always learn more. He says my life is important."

Blair moved forward suddenly. He took the girl's slim shoulder, and turned her toward him. He stood there, in the middle of the steep trail, with the tall grasses and embroidered shadows beside it, held her thus, and looked down into her young, golden face.

"He's decided what's good for you, too, hasn't he? He thinks he's God. In that way he's no different from some of our western thinkers he seems to despise so much. Yes, he is wise. But when will the wise learn that wisdom doesn't give them the right to run the universe?"

"I do not understand," said Yuki, her eyes dark and wide.

He took both her shoulders, thrilling to touch them, and he crushed her body gently to his, feeling all the live shape of it in his own body. He found her lips. She trembled and he knew then that she had not been kissed before.

Sometime later he walked away, leaving her still there on the trail. He knew, and felt she too must know, that they would never come together again. Now he would return to the Tokyo Tribune and take up the career of Edward Blair again, and in a day or two the story of the magic monks of H a t a k a

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Shrine would brighten page two, and his photos would cause some comment, but everyone would be sure there was some natural explanation for it, and in a short time it would all be forgotten.

Blair would not forget. He would never forget the girl's golden skin, nor the warmth of her parted lips, and she would not forget him either, no matter what Naito taught. For this was something that Naito could not understand, neither in terms of science nor his own queer magic art.

Once more Blair looked back, turning and seeing the girl for the last time. She raised her arm to him, then dropped it again.

After that he saw her as a motionless stroke of gold against the darkening mountain.


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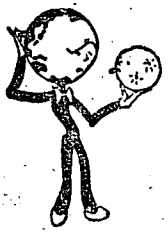

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# travelogue

*by ... ROGER DEE*

ADVENTURE came late—at thirty-two, if the detail matters—into the diffident life of Wesley Filburn, but with all the fictional improbability of the wistful little fantasies he wrote for his living.

It called, in a voice Wesley failed at first to recognize because he had long ago given up listening, just when he least expected it—when he was walking one late April afternoon along the rocky banks of Sampson's Creek, temporarily blind to the drowsy mountain charm of the place while he mulled over an inconsistency that niggled at his current plot-line.

There was this utopian little planet, he mulled, that circled the major sun of a binary star named Aldhafera (no other star would do; the name *Aldhafera* was perfect, too laden with the romance of the starways to surrender) upon which his space-roving protagonist was to discover his true self—and the glory of the One Love inevitable to every such spacefaring gallant—by destroying his ship

**She seemed to be so much smaller than any child would be, turned out with a fragile perfection more doll-like than human ...**

*Roger Dee returns to these pages with the story of Wesley Filburn—diffident, gentle, dreaming Wesley Filburn—whom it seemed life had passed by, until something strange and wonderful happened to him over on Sampson's Creek, and Wesley became aware of new and wonderful worlds—particularly wonderful Sonimuira! A new life had begun!*



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and so making it impossible betray Her people's unspoiled paradise to his own grasping mechanical culture. The rub was, and Wesley was too honest to dismiss it unresolved, that any world circling one primary of a double star would very probably be something less than a paradise. Caught between two such stellar furnaces, it was more likely to be a slag-shelled inferno of heat and desolation.

Still, if one sun should be very small or nearly spent, there might be no problem at all. It might even offer fresh background detail as a novel sort of moon, shedding living light upon an already exotic setting. He'd have to check further on Aldhafera, though he doubted that his scanty astronomical texts would supply his want.

The call, too strong for a bird's piping yet too slight and musical for even a child's voice, drew him back from Aldhafera to the banks of Sampson's Creek.

It was a child after all, but an improbably tiny one.

She floundered in a pool deep enough to drown even an adult, so manifestly helpless that Wesley plunged instantly to her rescue without arguing his own inability to swim. He had a briefest glimpse of hair floating like a small silver cloud about a frightened elfin face with enormous lilac eyes; then the icy pool received him and he was splashing mightily to keep his own head above water.

Momentum took him near enough for the child to grasp his sleeve. The rest, the immemorial emergency of learning to swim the hard way, was up to Wesley.

He made it, not because he was capable of meeting such a challenge at a moment's notice but because the bank and safety were after all only a few feet away. His frantic paddlings brought the two of them out, to lie panting and dripping side by side in the welcome heat of sunlight.

When he had recovered enough to sit up, Wesley examined his find with more amazement than satisfaction.

The child was smaller than any child could be, he thought, and turned out with a fragile perfection more doll-like than human. Her hair was drying rapidly to look more like spun platinum than like silver; her dress, a mothlike wisp that changed color with mother-of-pearl iridescence, seemed not to have been wet at all. There was a belt of slender metal links about her tiny waist, caught with a flattened oval buckle the size of a pocket watch.

Her lilac eyes, more blue than purple now with the shock gone out of them,

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looked up at him wonderingly.

"Are you hurt?" Wesley asked. The child winced from the sound and he lowered his voice, feeling like an orgre before such fragility. "Can you talk yet?"

He reached out to help her and she caught his thumb with both tiny hands and stood knee-deep in grass that barely covered his own ankles.

Her voice was as high and clear as a sleigh-bell. "Clellingherif," she said, as if that unintelligibility settled everything.

Wesley considered her unhappily. It was not Adventure yet; he saw only that he was saddled with a lost child who looked like a pixie and who talked like a bird, and that he would very probably lose the rest of his afternoon getting her off his hands.

He tried again.

"Where do you live?" It was so unlikely that her parents might have moved to Sampson City, with its insular aloofness and its once-a-day train, that he dismissed the idea at once.

Second thought heartened him briefly. "Are your parents staying at the inn?"

The "inn" was a rambling, seedily genteel resort catering mainly to retired couples and trout fishermen. He owned a half interest in it and lived there with his Aunt Jessica, who owned the other half and controlled both, and Miriam Harrell, who taught sixth grade at the Sampson County school and nursed a determination to become Mrs. Wesley Filburn. If the child's parents were new guests of his Aunt Jessica's, his problem was solved already.

It was not so simple. The child fingered the oval buckle of her belt, shaping a curious suggestion of pattern.

"*Mitsik* Clellingherif," she said.

She caught Wesley's thumb again and as quickly as that they were no longer on the banks of Sampson's Creek.

They were in a place that Wesley, for all his experience at contriving the unlikely, could not have dreamed up in a month of trying. It was essentially a room, not large yet seemed to extend indefinitely, that looked at first glance like a conservatory for exotic plants and at second like a library stocked with tables and files and endless shelves of books. There was a sprinkling of what might have been furniture, with here and there an erect oval that could have been either mirror or crystal screen.

The whole was scaled to a dimunition that made Wesley feel like Gulliver in Lilliput, and through it breathed a barely perceptible scent

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somewhere between honeysuckle and crushed mint.

The man and woman who came out of that improbable background seemed to Wesley's dizzied senses hardly taller than the child who held his thumb, but their resemblance to her was as unmistakable as their serene air of having the situation completely in hand.

The girl's mother took her away, making admonishing birdlike sounds. The father, as if aware of Wesley's wavering control, gripped his thumb in turn and led him to an open expanse of soft-rugged floor large enough to hold them both.

"Sit down," he said in unexpected sleigh-bell English.

Wesley sat, and realized finally that Adventure had come.

It had come to him, he discovered, because the child—Mitsik—had not visited a world with fish before. The fascination of a sunning trout in Sampson's Creek had proved too much for her small caution; maneuvering for a closer look had tumbled her into the pool, and her transporter unit did not work under water.

His rescue had placed her parents—the father's name was Clelling and her mother's Herif, explaining her cryptic pipings—under an obligation that seemed to demand fulfillment. It was something like letting a genie out of his bottle and being granted a wish, except that Clelling and Herif were no sort of djinni and their capacity for granting wishes was strictly limited.

"A travel advisor's work is more interesting than profitable," Clelling said. "But be assured that we shall offer as much as lies within our means."

Embarrassed, Wesley made deprecating sounds. "I don't really want payment. I'm more interested in knowing how and why you're here."

The information was readily given. Clelling, completely telepathic among his own kind and nearly so with humanity—as witness his instant grasp of English—anticipated Wesley's questions with answers that left him dizzier than before.

"The galaxy is a more populous place than you imagine," Clelling said. "And civilized to a degree beyond your comprehension. Transportation and trade among so many differing worlds is a complex business occupying the attention of millions. My wife and I deal in travel for pleasure—we are what you would call tourist agents."

A vision of seeing Aldhafera at first hand electrified Wesley. "You're selling star trips *here?* On Earth?"

Clelling denied it with re-

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gret. "Your world has been under observation for years by a galactic ecological group in upstate Pennsylvania, but you are not ready yet. Economic and social stabilization, and elimination of war, must come before you can be admitted as a culture."

Wesley sighed and Clelling made hasty correction.

"Under the circumstances, that ban need not apply to you. We can offer help too with the information on galactic conditions you need to lend authenticity to your writing."

He went to a file that nestled between two feathery flowering shrubs and drew out a glossy folder that glowed in three-dimensional illustration as if lighted from within.

"Aldhafera," Clelling said.

Wesley took it almost reverently. The binary suns of Aldhafera *did* have planets—not one, as he had postulated, but five—capable of supporting life. The minor sun was negligible and all but extinct, furnishing precisely the exotic moon he had been considering when he first heard Mitsik piping in her pool.

"It's priceless," Wesley said. The text was undecipherable, but the photography so perfect that his eyes misted and refused to leave it. "It more than repays me."

Anxiety dimmed his rapture. "You did mean that I could keep it, didn't you?"

Clelling looked abashed. "Of course. It's only a sort of tourist travelogue... I'll select a group of them dealing with worlds that might interest you and see that our local outpost makes up English translations. They will be mailed to you as they are completed."

His wife appeared out of the shrub-and-file background, leading a chastened Mitsik, and stood beside him. Her fair head was hardly even with the seated Wesley's shoulder.

"We mustn't leave Sonimuira out of the group," she said. Her lilac eyes laughed with an inner, private amusement. "He'll like Sonimuira."

"Out of this group we can offer you one physical visit to the world of your choice," Clelling said. "Each brochure will have round-trip tear-off coupons attached. Bring them here when you have decided where you will go."

"If I have the nerve," Wesley said. The prospect dazzled him until he remembered his Aunt Jessica. "You'll still be here?"

"This is a permanent relay point," Clelling told him. "Our agency's galactic transporter has been here for centuries of your time."

There was more, but none

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of it was clear to Wesley later. It seemed only seconds before he was standing again on the banks of Sampson's Creek, perhaps a hundred yards upstream from the pool from which he had fished Mitsik. But the sun hung lower over the mountains and the birds were choosing perches for the night; he had been "away," Wesley estimated, for something over an hour.

It did not occur to him until he had walked back to the inn, and discovered in the walking that he had left the Aldhaferian booklet behind, that he might only have dozed during his stroll and dreamed it all. The dampness of his clothing reassured him—and disturbed his Aunt Jessica and Miriam—without eliminating that doubt.

Still later came the grimmer thought that he might even be losing his sanity. He worried about that, too upset to finish the Aldhaferian story he had begun, for a week.

Then the mail brought his first travelogue.

Charlie Birdsall, the rural carrier, blew his horn at the gate and handed over the sealed manila packet along with a letter from Wesley's literary agent. Charlie was a friend from high-school days and a perennial bachelor who found Wesley's future appalling.

"Got a ciracular from some tourist bureau," Charlie said. "And a letter from that agent fellow in New York. Letter's got a check for forty dollars in it."

He shook his head darkly at Wesley's worn look. "Fellow, you better get squared away before your lid slips. You can't write that wild stuff of yours and stand off two women at the same time. When're you going to learn?"

Wesley hefted his packet wistfully, wanting the privacy of his room but reluctant to offend Charlie by rushing off.

"I have to write," he said. "And as for marrying—maybe Aunt Jessica is right. Maybe a man wasn't meant to live alone."

Charlie snorted. "How wrong can you get? Look, a bunch of us are having a poker sit and beers tonight at Landon's service station. Why not come down with me, Wes?"

Wesley begged off. "Work to do, Charlie. I haven't turned in much material lately and my agent is getting impatient."

"When you wake up some morning on a leash," Charlie said, "don't say I didn't warn you." He put his car into gear and departed.

In his room, Wesley opened the letter first. There was a check for forty dollars, as Charlie had said, and a terse

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note from his agent that said:

*This one just made it, as see the seedy stipend. Can you come up with something fresher in the way of alien settings?*

*Henry.*

Wesley reserved answer until the packet was opened and his first brochure scanned.

"I can now," he said.

His eyes filled and his hands shook with the beauty and the wonder of it. The folder was like the one he had examined at Clelling-Herif's way-station, but with a difference; here colors and perspective had been rescaled to suit his familiar values, and the exposition was in beautifully lucid English.

He fingered the roung-trip coupons at the bottom of the last page. "To *see* a place like that," he said reverently. "If I only had the nerve..."

But he lacked the nerve, and knew it—how ever to explain it all to his Aunt Jessica?—and settled on the brochure as compensation in itself. It solved his difficulties with Aldhaferian story before he had finished the first two pages. The second planet of Aldhafera's major twin was precisely what he had needed for his space-rover's utopia, but with innovations wonderful to behold.

Its dominant race owned a corner on pleasant privacy that put Swift's Laputans, with their magnetic flying island, to shame; this world was dotted with air-borne masses of tiny, gas-filled aerophytes which multiplied after the fashion of coral polyps to build personal estates of any size from a few acres to whole square miles. On these luxurious clouds, in sylvan groves and orchid gardens and dew-bright dells, lived a benevolent race of humanoids further advanced in the gentle art of keeping the peace with one another than humanity was ever likely to be.

Below lay an ocean world dotted with green-and-coral archipelagoes, inhabited by a satisfactorily savage species of non-humanoids whose evolutionary line had worked the flotation principle into its own makeup. These monsters prowled fiercely upon the waters, following after the cloud islands in the perennial hope of discovering one low enough to plunder.

The contrast, for Wesley's purpose, was perfect. His hero could land on a floating preserve, forcing it down by overload. There was occasion for a first-class battle with the water-walkers in which he could rescue his One Love at least twice, and a crashing denouement in which the argonaut atoned for his injury by blasting his

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ship away tenantless under robot control, so saving the day for all concerned and making it forever impossible to betray Her people to his own.

Above all Wesley had at hand a wealth of detail, of color and atmosphere unarguably convincing because it was true, that offered him the idea-lode writers dream of. Ordinarily the most cautious of workmen, Wesley flung himself into such an orgy of creation that the Aldhaferian epic was reorganized, written and rewritten within three days.

For Wesley, the wordage was tremendous. It ran to novelet length, and it was all good.

"Damned good," said Wesley, who was more given to mailing his manuscripts in fear and trembling that in confidence.

That confidence waned during the succeeding week when Charlie Birdsall continued to drive past the inn with nothing more encouraging than a wave of the hand. Miriam grew more intent in her attentions as Wesley spent less time at his writing. His Aunt Jessica, gauging his ebbing resistance, put the first of her matrimonial trumps on the table.

She cornered Wesley one morning just after Miriam had driven away to school in her coupe.

"It's high time you stopped mooning around with the stars, Wesley Filburn," his Aunt Jessica said, "and took stock of yourself. You're thirty-two years old, you've no income except the miserable dribble you get from your wild stories and you've no more responsibility than a wild goat in the hills. It's time you settled down."

Wesley might have protested his independence, but his lifelong conditioning had left him too little to discover. His Aunt Jessica had brought him up from childhood after the death of his parents, who had owned his half of the inn before him; he owed her a great deal for her care and affection, as he had been told often enough to remove any lingering doubt, and the least he could do now was heed her wiser counsel.

"I'm too old and worn to keep the inn as it should be kept," his Aunt Jessica went on firmly. "I'm ready to retire and live with my widowed sister in California, but I can't go until you're safely settled with someone who will see that you take care of your own interests. You couldn't deny me the comfortable retirement I've earned, could you?"

Wesley couldn't. It occured to him that his Aunt Jessica was only fifty-five and that

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her retirement had been provided for out of the net proceeds of the inn—it had always taken his share to meet expenses—but he put the ungrateful thought away guiltily. Aunt Jessica had earned her retirement while he idled, too busy spinning dreams to attend to his trust. If he had had no Aunt Jessica to turn to—

"It's simple enough," his Aunt Jessica said. "I'll move in with my sister as soon as you are married. Miriam is an excellent manager; the two of you should have a comfortable thing of it, the tourist trade holding up as it is."

"I suppose you're right," Wesley said. "You usually are."

Miriam was a competent manager; he could picture her without strain with her rimless spectacles clamped firmly on her adequate nose, meager lips set while she totted up their assets. Miriam was an inch taller than himself and a year or two older, but such details, his Aunt Jessica was fond of saying, mattered a fig or less. It was the heart that counted.

"All that's needed," his Aunt Jessica finished, "is telling Miriam. Will you, or shall I?"

Some spark of repressed independence made Wesley mutter, "I'll tell her."

It was not really necessary, he found when he sat with Miriam on the verandah that evening and looked down over the slope of mountain toward the handful of lights that marked out Sampson City. The weight of his decision weighed on him so heavly that Miriam, who was nothing if not decisive, took the initiative.

"Your Aunt Jessica is planning to retire and live with her sister in California," she said. "Can you run the inn alone, Wesley?"

"I doubt it," Wesley said. He knew he couldn't; there were too many prosaic but vital details, too many procurings and disbursings for his dreamer's nature to cope with. "I was thinking that maybe you—"

"Of course I will," Miriam said. She peered in the gloom, saw his tension and contented herself with patting his hand. "I'll resign as soon as school is out in June. We'll be married, and I'll look after things when Miss Filburn goes to her sister's. Is that the way you want it, Wesley?"

Wesley wondered if it was. The spring darkness below and beyond the inn was warm and alive, vibrant with the tantalizing nebulous promise that had led him on like a will-o-the-wisp all his life without once revealing itself. The romance of strange places never seen and never to be seen called powerfully, a tocsin so familiar that his

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response was as much nostalgia as longing.

His Aunt Jessica joined them on the verandah, saving any need of further talk unnecessary. He had an impression, instantly rejected as unworthy, that she had been listening behind the screen for the outcome of his proposal.

"It's all settled, Miss Filburn," Miriam said comfortably. "Wesley and I are going to be married in June."

The second brochure arrived next morning, again, coincidentally, with a letter from Wesley's agent. Terse as ever, the note said:

*Great stuff; background so convincing I dammed nearly believed in it myself. Shoot me another.*

*Henry.*

With it came a check that left Wesley faint with disbelief.

The second travelogue advertised a world vastly different from Aldhafera's utopia. The system was Alpha Geminorun, Castor—a visual binary subdivided into spectroscopic doubles, presenting a four-sun family revolving in pairs about itself, a cosmic madhouse that gave precarious shelter to only one inmate.

That planet, called Turlak, was unique in the galaxy. Caught at a focal point between its various primaries, it suffered every extreme of heat and cold, of grinding glacier and roaring volcano. Approach or retreat of an ascendant sun could double a visitor's weight or levitate him; the air itself rushed from hemisphere to hemisphere in a continuous demoniac hurricane.

The possibilities were unlimited.

Out of them Wesley contrived for an exploring party to crash under Turlak's freakish gravity, for a beautiful girl ecologist to be snatched from the ship by the perpetual hurricane and for the expedition's handsome young hydroponicist to rescue her. Because there were no convenient inimical life forms on Turlak, Wesley threw in a couple of logical menaces in the way of red-hot lava serpents and bat-winged flying crocodiles whose natural element was the rushing wind.

The following week saw this thumbnail synopsis turned into another novelet, less idyllic but more hectic than the first. He handed it over, weighed and stamped and sealed with scotch tape, to Charlie Birdsall on the morning of the first Monday in May.

Charlie eyed the flat packet with respect. "Looks like you're getting the range," he

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said. "Wes, if you turn 'em out regular like this for the price that last one brought, you've got it made."

He squinted appraisingly when Wesley made deprecating sounds. "I'd keep it quiet if I was you, though. Miriam will want to renovate the inn after you're married, maybe add a new wing."

Wesley stiffened. "How did you know?"

"The announcement was in yesterday's paper," Charlie told him.

Miriam had wasted no time, Wesley thought. Confound it, you'd almost think she was deliberately burning his bridges behind him by making the thing public before he could reconsider.

Charlie startled him further.

"Maybe you know what you're doing, at that," Charlie said cryptically. "Maybe you're keen enough to know a good deal when you see one, after all."

He put the car into gear and paused with a foot on the clutch. "So busy talking I nearly forgot I had another one of those tourist ads for you. What did you do, join a vacation club?"

"In a way," Wesley said. "I won't have a chance to use it, though."

"Tough," Charlie said, and drove away.

To distract resentful thought Wesley turned to his Adventure again, forgetting in the fascination of his third brochure that, for him, doom rhymed with June. The locale this time was a planet called Porizinia, circling Alpha Bootis—Arcturus. No life existed upon the surface of Porizinia because of her primary's tremendous heat, but the subterranean world below was something else again. The planet was largely igneous and so translucent, clear enough to let Arcturus light with fairy luminescence the endless labyrinth of caverns and tunnels that made up a nether environment all their own.

The maze was filled in its lower levels with a buried ocean that ran in crystal tides past coral shoals where mermaid autochthons sunned themselves in the filtered glow and sang siren songs to enchant visitors. Those sections passable to air-breathers were carefully designated. Wesley, fingering the round-trip coupons at the end of the brochure, was startled to find himself eaten with the desire to see the place at first hand.

He rejected the impulse partly because he knew the outcry his Aunt Jessica and Miriam would set up and partly because he understood it for what it was, an instinctive groping for an escape from the catastrophe of June.

It was better in any case

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to wait, he decided, recalling the near-impish look of Herif when she had promised that he would like the Sonimurian travelogue. What, he wondered, was Sonimuira like?

Before the Porizinian story was finished he had another note from his agent:

*The Turlak job went like a collector's item. They're screaming for more. Can do?*

*Henry.*

Enclosed was another check that would have made Wesley drunk with triumph but for the knowledge that June was only three weeks away.

The Porizinian story was mailed. Another brochure arrived, and another; life became a predictable routine, half labor, half escape. Wesley wrote and dreamed and talked briefly over the gate with Charlie Birdsall. Now and then, too tired to sit longer at his typewriter, he sat on the verandah at night with his Aunt Jessica and Miriam.

They did not press him now because their victory was won and their laurels assured. May dwindled away, quiet as a candle; Wesley's account fattened in the Sampson City bank; his agent promoted an anthology of his later stories and suggested a novel.

Wesley, in his room, laughed hollowly. Success, now that it had come, had an ashy taste.

The Sonimuiran booklet arrived on the twenty-fifth of May. A newly-envious Charlie Birdsall passed it to him over the gate, and a bombshell of disillusion with it.

"Have to admit I figured you wrong all these years," Charlie said. "You *do* know a good deal when you see it. Glad to see you making the most of it, Wes."

Wesley hefted his packet. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean," Charlie said. "When Miss Jessica retires you'll really have it made, with Miriam looking after the inn while you pull in big money writing."

He stretched his underlip with thumb and forefinger and let it snap back. "It could be as good for a man with a job like mine, if he had a half interest in a place like this to begin with. I'd jump at it just like you did."

Wesley was amazed and chilled. "You'd marry for *convenience?*"

"Sure," Charlie said. "There's no percentage in this romance stuff."

He went on in sudden confessional candor: "Most women figure it the same way. I know Miriam does—she tried to hook me when I

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first got my job with the post office, but the odds were all hers and I wasn't having any. That was before you came to room with your aunt —and why do you think she picked the inn here, anyway? Miriam's not getting any younger and she's looking out for herself. I'm glad to see you've got brains enough to do the same."

"Well," Wesley said. There was nothing to add to it. "Well."

"Well, I better go," Charlie said, and did.

In his room, Wesley sat with his unopened packet in his hand and thought gray thoughts.

It was one thing to plod dutifully to doom because of loyalty to his Aunt Jessica and an unwillingness to hurt Miriam, but another matter entirely to be maneuvered into a selfish solution of their problems. Miriam wanted security, however obtained. His Aunt Jessica wanted retirement with the income that would continue to roll in as long as the inn remained under Miriam's capable hand. The two of them had arranged it all between them as calmly as they might have made up a grocery list.

"Sucker," Wesley said. "If there were a way out—"

Because there was none he let it drop and opened his latest brochure.

The planet of Sonimuira circled a star listed as B ~a Aquilae, Alschain. Details of distance and placement meant nothing to the electrified Wesley; what did register was that Herif, in venturing that he would like Sonimuira had made a galactic understatement.

One look sent Wesley headlong to town in his Aunt Jessica's car. Returning an hour later, he ripped his small armful of travelogues to pieces and—except for one page that fell behind his desk—burned them in the backyard incinerator.

Then he disappeared in the direction of Sampson's Creek.

It was not until the middle of July, when the estate was settled and Miss Jessica Filburn was securely domiciled with her sister in California and Charlie Birdsall and Miriam had married and moved into the inn, that any light was shed upon Wesley's going. Then Charlie, in moving out Wesley's desk to furnish a new guest room, found the final page of the Sonimuiran booklet and set up a cry that brought Miriam, dust-capped and aproned, on the run.

"This is where Wes went," Charlie said.

Miriam pored without comprehenson over the lone page. "How do you know?"

"He got these folders all along from some vacation club," Charlie explained.

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"Must have paid his passage in advance, because this one had tear-off tickets at the bottom.... Where else would he go?"

Miriam sniffed critically at a picture showing a smiling bevy of girls disporting themselves against a lush semi-tropical background.

Charlie took back the page. "Can't tell where the place is, but it says here that the climate is about like Samoa's, that there's no trade or industry and that the population—get this!—is ninety-four and six tenths female. Even Wes should do all right for himself there."

"He'll be back," Miriam said. "He can't stay long in a place as expensive as that."

Charlie snorted in disgust. "Would he come back after having Judge Talbot draw up a paper leaving his bank account to Miss Jessica and his half of the inn to me, and then disappearing with nothing but a bathing suit and a pair of sun glasses?"

"He could still come back," Miriam said stubbornly.

An irregularity at the bottom of the page caught Charlie's eye and settle the issue.

"He can't, either," Charlie said. "He didn't tear out his return ticket."

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## *A COMMENT ON* ONE TOUCH OF TERRA

***I have read Dr. Hannes Bok's ONE TOUCH OF VENUS, which appears elsewhere in this publication, with understandable interest. While I may deplore, as a cultural anthropologist, Dr. Bok's obvious empathy towards these miners with their socially regrettable attitude towards the original inhabitants, I must say that Dr. Bok paints quite an effective picture of living conditions in these scattered communities.***

***I have been privileged, though, as I have said elsewhere, to visit with and spend considerable time with the natives who withdrew to the hills soon after our ships first landed.***

***I have found these men and women extraordinarily hospitable, warm and friendly, once they sense that you do not come among them as a tourist.***

***They have a very ancient culture, a rich language (with gradations similar to 20th century Javanese). Their chants are fantastic, long, mournful wails, whose shadings, whose tremolos, still inspire you and make you one with them. I hope to translate some of these chants in the near future, including one dedicated to the sacred sand-lillies, so erroneously called zips by the miners.***

Vithaldas Pattopadhyaya O'Quinn
Lecturer in Venusian Antiquities

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# title fight

*by ... WILLIAM C. GAULT*

FJO

**These robots were coming up in the world, getting too big for their britches. Nick Nolan would show them....**

THE SOUNDS from above were dim in the dressing room. Over his head, between him and the thousands of fans, were the tons of concrete, robot-made concrete. Man conceived but robot made.

He looked down at his hands, his strong, short-fingered hands. Complete with fingerprints—but of protonol. Who'd know it, to look at them? In man's image, he was made. In God's image, man was made, if one believed in that, any more. In man's image, he was made, but not with man's status.

His name was Alix 1340, which meant only that he was the thirteen hundred and fortieth of the Alix type. The short, broad Nordic type. In about twenty minutes, he was due in the ring. He was fighting for the middleweight championship of the world.

Joe Nettleton had dreamed that one up. It had been born in the verbiage of his daily syndicated sports column, nurtured by the fans' clamor, and fanned into reality—by what? Animosity? These robots were coming up in the

*In every robot brain there was a remote-controlled circuit breaker—and in every robot brain there was resentment and the determination to work for THE DAY. William Campbell Gault, better known to the readers of our companion magazine,* The Saint Detective Magazine, *tells the compelling story of the robots who passed and the robots who fought and who planned for the moment—and what happened.....*



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world, getting too big for their britches. Nick Nolan would show this Alix his place.

Nick was the champ, a man, made in His image. He butted and thumbed and gouged and heeled. His favorite target was the groin. But *he* was a man. Oh, yes, he was a man. A champion among men.

Manny came in. His real title was Manuel 4307, but robots like to forget the numbers. He was Manny, Alix's manager and number one second. A deft and sharp and and able robot, Manny.

He said, "I thought it would be better if we were alone. No fans, especially. And I've had a bellyfull of sports writers."

"Even Joe Nettleton?" Alix asked. "Joe's on our side, isn't he?"

"It's hard to say. Do you ever wonder about him, Alix?"

Alix didn't answer, right away. He knew there were robots who 'passed', went over to the status line and lived as humans. He didn't know how many there were, and he often wondered about them. In every robot brain, there was a remote-controlled circuit breaker. They could be stopped with the throwing of a switch at the personnel center. There was a well-guarded office and a man on duty at that center twenty-four hours of every day.

Now Alix said, "I never thought much about Joe, either way."

"What have you been thinking?" Manny asked.

"I've been thinking," Alix said slowly, "that we fight man's wars and pulverate his garbage and dehydrate his sewerage, but we're not citizens. Why, Manny?"

"We're not human. We're not—orthodox." Manny was watching him closely as he spoke.

"Not human? They feed us Bach and Brahms and Beethoven and Shakespeare and Voltaire in our incubation period, don't they? And all the others I've forced myself to forget. Does this—this *soul* come from somewhere outside the system?"

"I guess it does. They don't feed us much religion, but I guess it comes from God."

"And what's He like?"

"It would depend upon who you ask, I guess," Manny said. "Sort of a superman. From Him they get their charity and tolerance and justice and all the rest of their noble attributes." Manny's laugh was bitter. "How they love themselves."

"They're so sure about everything else," Alix said, "but not very sure of their God. Is that it?"

"That's about it. I heard one man say He watches when a sparrow falls. I guess we're less than the sparrows, Alix."

There was a silence, and then Manny put a hand on

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Alix's shoulder. "We've got about fifteen minutes, and I've got a million things to say. Maybe I should have said them earlier."

Alix turned at the gravity of Manny's voice. His lumagel eyes went over Manny's dark face, absorbing his rigid intensity. Whatever it was that was coming, it was more important than the fight.

Manny said quietly, "Win this one, and blood will run in the streets, Alix."

"Human blood?"

"White man's blood. We've got the Negro, and the Jap and the Chinamen and all the rest of them who got their rights so recently. And what kind of rights have they got? Civil, not in the people's hearts. You think those races don't know it? We were talking of their God, Alix. Well, the robots have one, too. His name is Alix 1340."

"Manny, you've gone crazy."

"Have I? Joe Nettleton's one of us, Alix. This was his scheme, and the four men who run the switch at the personnel center; they're ours, too. Top robots. Their I.Q.'s all crowding two hundred. We've got the brains, Alix, and the man power. We've got the combined venom of a billion non-whites. And now we've got you."

"A pug. What kind of god would I make? You're off the beam, Manny."

"Am I? Did I ever give you anything but the straight dope? They adore you, Alix. You've been a model to them. You could be their king, if you say the word."

"You've been setting this up, you and Joe Nettleton? This fight tonight's the crisis? You've been building toward tonight."

"But it takes a front man, a symbol. You're the only one who can be that. You're the only one they'd all back."

Alix looked again at his hands, the hands that had taken him to the first mixed fight in history, to a title fight. 'Man Versus The Machine' most of the sports scribes had labeled it, though not Joe Nettleton. Machine? A machine that had assimilated Voltaire? A machine that had listened to Brahms?

What differentiates man from his machines? Supremacy? Supremacy would be established tonight. No, it wasn't physical supremacy. And there were robots far beyond man's mental powers.

The spark, then, the spark from their God? How did they know they had it? In all the wrangling mysticism that had gone through so many directed misinterpretations, where could they find their God?

"Thinking it over?" Manny asked. "Why so quiet,

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Alix?"

Alix's grin was saturnine. "Believe it or not, I was thinking of God."

"*Their* God?"

Alix frowned. "I suppose. Their's and the sparrows'."

There were three spaced knocks at the door. Manny said, "Joe Nettleton. He wants to talk to you. We've got about eight minutes, Alix." He went to the door.

Joe Nettleton was tall, and pale and brown-eyed. The eyes should be lumagel, and Alix studied them, but could note no difference from those of a man.

Joe said to Manny, "He knows?"

Manny nodded.

Joe turned back. "Well—Alix—?"

"I don't know. It's—it's—monstrous, it's—" He shrugged his shoulders and pounded one hand into the palm of the other.

"You're *it*, Alix. King, god, what you will. For six years, I've built you up—in *their* papers, in *their* minds. Clean, quiet, hard working Alix. And humble. Oh, the humility I gave you has made me cry, at times."

Manny said in mild protest, "You didn't have to build that angle much. Alix is humble. Alix is—he's—he's—" And the articulate Manny had no words.

Joe Nettleton's pale face was cynical. He said, "The way you feel is the way they all feel—the black ones out there and the brown ones and the yellow ones."

"They've got their rights," Alix said.

"Have they? Take a look at the first twenty rows, ringside. You'll see what rights they have, word rights, paper rights. But not in the hearts of men. Oh, the grapes of wrath are out there, Alix, beyond the twentieth row. Haven't you any sense of history, of destiny?"

Alix didn't answer.

Manny said, "He's been thinking of God, he tells me."

Joe Nettleton's face was blank. "God? Their God?" He looked at Alix wonderingly. "This Superman they scare us with? You don't eat that malarkey, do you, Alix?"

Alix shrugged, saying nothing.

"They don't believe it themselves," Joe protested. "It's one of those symbols they set up, to make them superior. They ever tell you what He looks like? Oh, they give Him a prophet, sure, and the prophet gives them words to live by. Don't kill, don't steal, don't lie, don't lust, don't envy— Words, Alix, words, words, words— Judge them by their actions."

Alix looked up. "I'm not—cut out to be a leader."

"Yes, you are. And I cut you out, in their minds, with words. The brown ones read me and the black ones and the yellow ones, and I built you

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up, in their minds—*and tonight they'll wait for a signal from you.*"

"A signal from me? Are you—what—?"

"A signal from you. To those in the crowd, to those watching on the video screens, the ones who are briefed and *know* about rioting, about how to steer a revolution. Think of the irony of it—man's prejudice building the army of resentment and man's genius building the machines that army can use to destroy man—white man. White man—first."

"First—?" Manny said. "You've dreams beyond tonight, Joe?"

Joe smiled disarmingly. "I use too many words. That one got away. We can't think beyond tonight, now." He turned to Alix. "It's not an involved signal, Alix. It's just one word. The word is 'kill'. From *you* its' more than a word, it's an order."

There was a knock at the door, and the sono-bray above the door said. "Time to go up. Time for the big one."

All three were silent, and then Joe put a hand on Alix's shoulder. "You can't give the signal from your back, Alix. You'd better be standing up, when this one is over with."

Alix looked at Joe, trying to read behind those brown eyes. Alix said, "I'll be standing up. There's never been a second I doubted that."

They went out, and there was a clamor, a ring of scribes in the corridor beyond the showers. One of them voiced it for all of them, "What the hell is this, Manny? Joe a cousin, or something. How about a statement?"

Manny looked at them bleakly. "We hope to win, but we're up against a superior being. It's in God's lap."

Cynical men, but they resented the blasphemy—coming from a robot.

Joe said, "And Alix is his prophet. Who's betting what?"

No answer. They stared at Joe, and some wrote down a few words. One of them looked at Alix.

"How about you, Alix? How do you feel?"

Alix the humble. the new day Uncle Tom, the subservient. Alix lifted his chin and didn't smile. "Confident. I'll win."

"How?" another asked.

"Hitting him harder, and oftener. What's he got but a hook and an iron jaw?"

"Guts," one of them said. "You've got to hand him that, Alix."

"I concede nothing," Alix answered. "We'll see, tonight."

There were no further questions. They went down the long aisle that led to the bright ring, Manny and Alix and the other handler, who'd

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been waiting in the prelim boys' shower room.

Eighty thousand people in the Bowl, a clear, warm night, and millions watching on the video screens around the globe. Video hadn't hurt this one—this was history, a robot crossing the status line. They wanted to be a part of this.

The referee was black, Willie Newton. It would look like less favoritism, if the referee was black reasoned the white man in their left-handed reasoning.

Bugs around the arcs, and big, ebony Willie in his striped shirt, waiting in the ring, smiling, just *happening* to be in Alix's corner as he climbed through.

Willie bent, pretending to help part the ropes. Willie whispered, "You'll get all the breaks you need, Alix."

Alix came through and stood erect. "I don't want a single break, Willie, just a fair shake. *You* can understand it has to be like that."

"I can Alix. I'm sorry. About the name—just Alix? Or I could blur the rest."

"Alix one-three-four-oh, not blurred. It's my name."

He turned from Willie then, acknowledging the thunder behind him, both hands high in salute. He could see the rows stretching out from ringside—the first twenty all white. Most of the thunder came from high in the stands.

And now the champ came down his aisle, his faded purple dressing robe across his bulky shoulders, his handlers a respectful few paces behind him.

Nick Nolan, the middleweight champion of the world. His ears were lumpy, his brows ridged with scar tissue. His round head centered on those bulky shoulders, apparently with no neck to connect them. A fringe of red hair and a brutal, thick featured face.

Made in His image?

Some words ran through Alix's mind— "Is this the Thing Lord God made and gave— To have dominion over sea and land...?"

This was a hell of a time to be recalling Markham.

Nick came over to his corner, the false geniality on his face as phoney as the gesture of a champ coming to the challenger's corner. Nick said, "Best—between us, huh?"

"The better," Alix corrected him. "Keep them above the belt, Nick."

Nick grinned. "Don't I always? I came up the hard way, Alix."

Alix said nothing, staring. ...*when this dumb Terror shall rise to judge the world*...

A man with a hook and an urge to combat. The hard way? Maybe. He'd taken enough punches to give him a lifetime lease on Queer

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Street. But he'd handed out more than he'd received. A spoiler and a mixer. A weight-draper and in-fighter and an easy bleeder.

*Blood will run in the streets, Alix...*

In the ring, Nick's blood would flow, and further stain the spotted canvas. In the streets, the blood of Nick's brothers would flow, in the streets around the world.

Title fight? Oh, yes.

The Irishman first, he'd come up through the ring to his grudging equality, and the Jew, then and the Filipino and the Negroe and the Cuban and all the others who wouldn't stay down. Who had their fists and their guts. Mickey Walker, Benny Leonard, Joe Louis—immortals all. Great men, great champs, great memories.

And he? Alix 1340? Different, a machine, no spark. He'd almost forgotten about no spark.

Nick's manager came over to inspect the bandages on Alix's hands, and then went back to his corner with Manny to inspect those on the battered hands of the champ.

Alix's hands were clean lined, no breaks, no lumps. Alix was a scientific hitter, and his protonol was better than the natural product.

*He watches the sparrows,* Manny had said. *A signal,* Joe had said. I wish somebody would give me a signal, Alix thought. It's too big for me.

The introductions, the numbers not blurred. The instructions, and Willie saying, "Clean tonight, Nick. I know you well, Nick. But this one is touchy, remember."

"Ah, save it," Nick told him. Champ, big man, Nick Nolan.

The buzzer and Manny's brief pat on the shoulder. Rising, and flexing on the ropes, looking down into that sea of faces, white faces. The ones who held dominion over sea and land.

Bugs in the arcs, a hush on the crowd and the bell.

Alix turned and here came Nick, shuffling across, wasting no time, bringing the fight to the upstart.

Nick had a right hand, too, but it was clumsy. The hook was better trained. Alix circled to his left, away from Nick's left, and put his jab easily to Nick's nose.

There are sportswriters, Alix knew, who talked of a *right* hook, but a man would need to be a contortionist to throw it. Unless he was *completely* unorthodox. Or a southpaw

Nick was neither. Nick had a right hand like a mallet, but it came from below or above, and was telegraphed by the pulling up of his right foot. Nick saved that for the time his opponent couldn't see or react.

Nick came in with the hook, trying to slide under Alix's extended left hand, trying to time the pattern of

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his feet to Alix's circling, looking for the hole.

Alix peppered him with the left, and then saw the low left hand of Nick's. Alix stopped circling—and tossed a singing right.

It traveled over Nick's left and found the button. Nick took two stumbling backward steps, and went down.

Resin dust swirled and the scream of the stands was like a single anguished cry.

Alix went to a neutral corner, shrugging his shoulder muscles loose, trying to still the sudden pounding of his heart. Nick had been knocked down before, often.

He took a full count, under the rules, but was on one knee at three. The big black semaphore of Willie's right hand and then those hands wiping the gloves and Willie stepping clear.

Nick stormed in. He got through Alix's left, this time, and sent a looping right hand high. It missed, but it was meant to miss. Nick's elbow smashed Alix's mouth.

Rage, a red rage and they stood in the corner, trading leather.

The hook came in low, and pain knifed into Alix's groin. In his aching blindness he could feel Nick's feet groping for his, trying to find his instep.

Champion, model.

Alix grabbed, and hung on. This one he had to win. This one could be lost, right now.

Nick said, "Break it up, phoney man. I can't hit you when you're hanging on."

The big slap of Willie's hand. Willie, playing it straight. Alix broke at the touch.

Alix broke—and Nick threw the right hand, on the break.

Foul? Of course, but Alix went down, his senses numb, his mind turning black. He lay on his face, not moving, the blackness moving through his body.

*What's this God like? It would depend upon who you ask. They ever tell you what He looks like?* The blackness turned red, the red of blood, running in the streets. And there was suddenly a cross, and a dim figure and he heard Willie's sonorous, "Five, six—"

He turned over at seven, was on one knee at eight and up at nine. And Nick came bulling in, both hands ready.

The bell.

He got to his corner without Manny's help. The magic of Manny's hands dug at his neck, bringing clarity. The ice, the other handler probing at his flaccid legs.

"I saw a cross, Manny."

"Nobody's crossing us, Alix. Don't think, Alix. Here." He gave him the water bottle.

Alix rinsed his mouth, and spit it out. "He's rough, Manny. He knows all the tricks."

"Don't you?"

"I don't want to. I saw a cross when I was uncon-

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scious, Manny. A cross like you see on a church."

"Don't tell me about it. Get him, boy. Don't try to mix with him, but get him, with that left, with your speed, with your brain. Get him."

"I'll try. But he's not typical, Manny. They're not all like Nick."

"The hell they aren't. He's one of the better ones. Get him."

The buzzer, the bell, and Nick.

Nick with the iron jaw, Nick with the hook and the bulging shoulders, Nick the champion.

Alix put the left into Nick's face, but it wasn't a jab. It was a straight left, with shoulder in it. It twisted Nick's nose, and brought blood.

Nick was nettled, and he charged. He charged into a straight, sweet right hand that was delivered from a flat-footed stance. Nick wavered, and tried to grab.

Alix felt his strength pour back and the pattern of his feet was sure and planned. A left, a feint, a jolting right, moving around this hulk, this blundering knot of flesh and muscle, beating a tatoo on him, spreading the blood. *Get him.*

It looked like a slaughterhouse. Blood all over Nick's face, and blood matting the curled, sweaty hair on his chest. Starting to look dazed, starting to wonder, the champ. The untypical man? He must be, he had to be, to have dominion over sea and land.

Why didn't he go down? Couldn't he see the pattern of it, the pattern Alix was tracing for him with his blood-soaked gloves? Why didn't he go down? Why didn't he quit?

He hadn't quit by the end of the fifth round. Out there, those eighty thousand were silent. This was no fight, this was now murder. Why didn't he quit?

Alix asked Manny, on the stool, before the sixth, "Why doesn't he quit? He can't win. Manny, I hate to hit him."

"Don't be a sucker. Don't be a damned fool." Manny's voice was hoarse. "As long as there's a spark of life in those bastards, they won't quit. He's dangerous yet. Alix."

A spark, a spark— Life? Cognizance? No, life, a spark of life.

In the sixth, Nick almost went to his knees, in the middle of the ring. But he got control, and stumbled toward Alix.

Alix came in fast and carelessly—and the earth erupted.

He's dangerous, yet, Alix. There was no blackness this time, just the blood red. There was no cross. But a voice? "In the sky, in the sky—" Silence.

Get up, Alix. For the black and brown and red and yellow

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who are watching you, around the world, get up. You're their hope, you're their WORD. Up, to one knee, and up just under the wire.

Nick didn't charge, this time. Wary and careful, he was, after the pasting he'd been taking. Let Alix make the mistakes, like the one he just had. Nick only needed one more.

Manny said, "Can you hit him, now? Still mourning for him, are you?"

Alix said, "I'm a machine, Manny. He can't hurt me. I can hurt him, but he can't hurt me."

"That's my boy." Manny said. "I'm glad you know what side of the fence you're on, finally."

"I know my place," Alix said. "I know my job."

"That you do. Get him."

He got him. They don't quit, these men. Not while they're conscious. Not while they're alive. Alix hit him everywhere there was room to hit, with both hands, knocking him down four times in the seventh round.

Each time, Nick got up. And in the eighth, he came out to meet Alix, walking into his doom, not flinching, not hiding, putting his crown on the line.

Supremacy? Nick had it, bastard though he was. But for how long? How long could he stay that dumb and still live?

Nick came out, his low hands a farce of a defense.

How long could he hold the animosity down with his arrogance and his brutality and his shoddiness? How much time did he have? Alix knew.

Nick came out for the eighth, and Alix hit him with a solid right hand. He didn't set it up, or feint Nick into the spot, or hesitate. There wasn't any need to.

He put all his weight and most of his bitterness into the button-shot that made him middleweight champion of the world.

Silence, a shocked silence at the history before them, and then, from the far seats, from the cheap seats, acclamation. The video cameras covered the ring, the crowd; the lights went on all over the huge bowl.

Manny hugged him, Joe Nettleton hugged him, and others.

In the far seats, no one moved. In the near seats, no one moved. Joe said, "The word, Alix."

They were bringing the banked microphones over, the microphones that would carry the word all over the world. The cameras trained on him. The word.

He looked at Joe, and Manny. He brought the mikes to mouth level, and moved back a bit. He said, "I won, tonight. I've no message for you. But someone has. It's in the sky."

Craning necks, a murmur, the cameras leaving Alix as the operators swung the huge

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machines toward the red letters in the sky.

Beside him, Manny gasped. Joe Nettleton stared, unbelieving, his mouth slack.

Red letters? Something like red, but luminous and miles high, and definite. The cameras were trained directly on it, now.

*FIND YOUR GOD.*

Manny said, "Alix—how—Are you, did you—? Alix, what in hell are you?"

"There's more to it they don't know," Alix said. "It's 'find your God or your machines will kill you'. I don't think there's any need to tell them the rest if they obey the first."

Manny said hoarsely, "But this message came through you? You're a—"

"A prophet? Me, a machine, Alix 1340?"

Joe said, "You're not sending out the other word?"

"Not yet. It's not time."

"How do *you* know," Manny cut in. "How do you know if it's time or not? And if their God wanted to send a message, why should he use a machine? Why should he use you?"

"Because," Alix said, "no man would listen. And if they don't listen, now, Manny, our time *will* come...."

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# R IS FOR ROBOT

NO ONE knows just when the first robot was built. Cretan legend tells of Talos, a giant man made from bronze, who defended the island by throwing rocks at invading ships, and from this and other stories grew the assumption that "robots" are man-like shapes fashioned from metal.

But we are now, at this moment, living in a robot era.

Computing machines are little more than robot clerks; traffic lights robot policemen; vending machines robot salesmen. Automation has turned our factories into self-operated units, and everyone has heard of the guided missiles which not only find their targets, but home in on them. Each time a machine is designed to do something faster and better than can be done by a human we enter a little deeper into the robot age.

And each machine so invented adds to the social problem, and inevitably has repercussions in every strata of our society. What to do with the clerks rendered redundant by the faster, more efficient computors? What to do with the workers made idle by automation in the factories? How best to spend the leisure given the people by the tireless machines?

This problem isn't new; we have had it with us since the dawn of industry, but now, as never before, the solution is a matter of urgency. Robots can turn the world into a paradise—if used for the benefit of all. Robots can destroy the world—if used for aggression and dominance. A robot can only do what it is designed to do. It can be made an instrument of destruction or an instrument of production; used for peace or war.

The choice, as always, is in our own hands.

—From AUTHENTIC SCIENCE FICTION, No. 69

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# strictly confidential

*by ... GORDON DICKSON*

**Reaching down inside Mikey's body, he hauled out by one wing the struggling green and purple figure of Topla Pong.**

To: Interstellar Bureau of Criminal Apprehension
From: Jake Hall
Hall Detective Service
*"BEHIND THE EIGHT BALL? CALL HALL!"*

MY CONNECTION with the Topla Pong caper began at approximately 3:15 P. M. of August 3rd, 1965. I was sitting at my desk, cleaning the dried blood from the front sight of my forty-five and having a couple of eye-openers from the office bottle. Both of the windows in the office were open.

The windows are at right angles to each other, since the dump is a corner office. As I finished the shot and poured myself another, a large green and purple butterfly came fluttering in one window, picked up the forty-five and flew out the other.

I don't mind admitting this made me sore. That was a sweet little gun and I had conceived a sentimental attachment for it, due to having many memories attached to it.

*"I was sitting at my desk, cleaning the dried blood from the front sight of my forty-five"—and BAM—we are right in the middle of the Topla Pong caper! There are some who will question the propriety of the inclusion of this slightly less than sedate account of this famous case in the pages of FANTASTIC UNIVERSE. To these, we commend Fritz Leiber's THE NIGHT HE CRIED (in Frederik Pohl's STAR SCIENCE FICTION STORIES, 1953, Ballantine), a beautiful travesty on Spillanism. The present story may remind you of the Leiber classic.*



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I ripped open the right hand bottom drawer of my desk, grabbed my second best gun—a .38 police special—and got to my feet determined to track down the butterfly that had taken it. Unfortunately, I made the mistake of turning my back to one of the windows as I rose. I caught a glimpse of green and purple out of the corner of my eye and the ceiling fell in.

"What the hell—" I thought, and passed out.

When I woke up, a short, hefty individual in a grey business suit was splashing water in my face.

"Lay off, buster," I said. "This is my best and only tie." And I struggled to my feet. He stopped splashing water and stood back. My head was killing me. I located the bottle and poured myself a triple shot. Then I took a second look at him.

"Who're you?" I said, picking up the thirty-eight, which was still on the desk top. I was sore enough to let him have it. I'm glad now I didn't. Some guys are sensitive and I know enough now to realize it would have hurt his feelings.

"IBCA Agent Dobuk," he answered me. "I am a Memnian from Pesh—formerly of the Plagiarism Section."

"Listen," I said. "The last time I copied anything was in the third grade. State your business, or blow."

"I am an agent of the Interstellar Bureau of Criminal Apprehension," he said sadly. "An emergency has caused me to be transferred to the Violent Crimes Section. That same emergency has brought me to your office. Although it is ordinarily against Interstellar Commission Rules to admit the existence of other races to backward natives, events have forced my hand."

I turned away from him and picked up my hat from the desk.

"See me later," I said. "I got a date with a butterfly."

"Wait," he said; and closed his fist around a handful of my suitcoat. "Let me explain first."

I tried to walk away from him, but it was like being held in a steel vise. Experimentally, I chopped his wrist with the barrel of the thirty-eight and bent it—the barrel of the thirty-eight, that is.

"Okay, bud," I said. "You talked me into it. I'll listen."

He let me go. I went back to the desk, put the bent thirty-eight away and got out my thirty-two from the filing case.

I felt better with that in my shoulder holster. I sat down.

"Take a chair," I said.

"Thank you," he answered. "I'll have to adjust my weight first. What should a human my size weigh?"

"I'd guess you at about a

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hundred and eighty," I said. He fiddled with his belt and sat down. The chair took it all right. "Sorry," he added. "I didn't want to take chances."

"Well, what's the dope?" I asked. He looked at me.

"What I have to say," he said, lowering his voice impressively, must never go beyond this room."

"I'll shut the windows," I said, starting to get up. "Never mind," he said, "I trust you."

"In that case," I said, "my fees are thirty bucks a day and expenses. If you feel like paying a retainer—"

He tossed me a thousand dollar bill. I stuffed it carelessly in my hip pocket. "Go ahead," I said. He looked at me grimly.

"You have just been visited by an interstellar criminal," he told me, lowering his voice. "In fact by one of *the* interstellar criminals."

"You mean the butterfly?" I asked.

"That butterfly, as you call him," he nodded. "He is, in reality, none other than Topla Pong, a Sngrian from Jchok." I shrugged. He was paying for the time.

"You're paying for the time," I said. "If you say so, okay. To me he's still a butterfly."

"A most dangerous butterfly," replied Dobuk. "A butterfly of the worst order. Not more than two weeks ago, sidereal time, he engaged a battle cruiser of the second class in the Coal Sack Area and destroyed it utterly. He is one of the great criminal minds of our present galactic era and one of the few great crime organisers."

"Crime organisers?" I asked.

"Criminal executives," he told me. "They do not belong to any particular branch of the criminal world, but to all. In two weeks he is capable of organising the population of this planet and so infecting it with criminal ideas that the Interstellar Fleet will have no choice but to sterilise the globe by wiping out all intelligent life upon it."

"I get you," I said. "He's dangerous."

"We must stop him," Dobuk nodded. "You and I together, must do what the IBCA has been trying to do for centuries."

"Why us?" I asked.

"The situation is critical," he answered. "Topla Pong has cropped up here where there is no one trained to stop him."

"What about you?" I said. He shook his head.

"I have the basic training, of course," he said mournfully. "But I'm strictly a plagiarism expert. I have no experience in violence. Also I'm too heavy for this world."

"Come again?" I asked. He gestured toward his belt.

"I have a gravity nullifier,"

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he explained. "I adjusted it to one hundred and eighty of your pounds. Without it I would weigh approximately two of your tons."

He looked to me like a guy on short leave from a strait-jacket, but he handed out thousand dollar bills. I picked up my hat.

"Okay," I said. "Let's go."

We went down the stairs and out into the street to where my battered forty-eight Chev was parked. It looked like a heap but things had been done to the motor and it was capable of a hundred and twenty if pushed. Detective Lieutenant Joe Haggerty was standing beside it. He glowered at me as I came up.

"Still clipping fruit stands for free apples, Haggerty?" I greeted him. His glower became a snarl.

"Listen, shamus," he said. "The fact that you saved the Governor's life last year isn't going to protect you forever. One of these days I'll find something to connect you with these hoods that are being found "dead around town with a forty-five, a thirty-eight, a thirty-two, or some other size slug in them. And when I do—"

He left the threat hanging in the air. We got in the Chev and pulled off. Dobuk was looking at me in awe.

"How can you stand to have anyone dislike you that much?"

"I manage," I said. Dobuk shook his head in disbelief.

"You humans have such tough emotions," he said. "There was a note on that in the IBCA guidebook to this planet, but I could hardly believe it."

"Live and learn, buster," I said. I pulled out into the traffic.

"Where are we going?" asked Dobuk.

"To the Platinum Wheel," I told him.

"But shouldn't we start trying to trace—"

"Look, bud," I said. "You hire me, you do things my way. Arson, gut-shooting, little things like that, I'll maybe cover up for a client. But if I find you're the guilty party, I'll throw you to the badges. After all, I'm in business in this town."

"What?" he said. He sounded bewildered.

We pulled up in front of the Platinum Wheel, the plushest nightclub in the territory—run by the Syndicate, of course. We left the car and walked inside.

"Jake!" screamed a gorgeous, long-legged, red-haired cigaret girl, the minute she saw me. "What are you doing here? Don't you know the Syndicate is out for your blood?"

"It's worth a couple of quarts just to see you, baby," I said, clutching her. We kissed. It was like drowning

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in a sunset colored sea. She was a good kid. I kissed her every time I saw her.

When I finally let her go, she stepped back revealing a hard-looking character in a head-waiter's outfit.

"Who let you in, Hall?" he grated.

"The pest exterminators," I said. "They got the small lice, but they wanted some help with the rats."

"A w i s e guy, huh?" he sneered and let fly a left with all of his two hundred and twenty pounds behind it. I ducked; and there was a nasty, splintering sound just behind my neck.

He had hit Dobuk.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" said Dobuk, bending over him.

"Forget it and come on," I said. We left the hard guy writhing on the emerald green carpet, clutching his mashed mitt; and walked back toward the office; in the rear of the building.

"Are you sure we're going about this in the right way?" asked Dobuk.

"In this territory, when you talk about organized crime, you talk about the Syndicate," I said.

"I just thought—a careful investigation of probabilities—a calculation of—"

"Let me give you a piece of advice," I said.

"What?" he asked.

"Don't think," I said.

"But that's impossible," said Dobuk.

We had reached the door of the office. I opened it and led the way in without bothering to knock. Inside, Mikey McGwendon sat wearing a tux, his nails smoothly manicured, behind a large desk on the front edge of which perched a platinum blonde—a knockout. Also present was a large gorilla-like character and a small weasel-faced character. They were wearing Brooks Bros. suits; but they weren't fooling me any. After you've been in this business as long as I have you can spot the type a mile off.

Mikey gave me a mechanical smile as Dobuk and I advanced to his desk. I thought to myself he had taken us for a couple of his well-heeled sucker patrons. But I was wrong.

"Well, if it isn't Jake Hall, the wonder boy shamus," he greeted me. "What can I do for you?"

"That depends," I said. Reaching out, I snagged the platinum blonde off the desk and crushed her in my arms. Our lips met. It was like drowning in a sea of black flame. This was a no good kid. I had never kissed her before, but one touch of her lips told me that. Holding her off at arms length, I saw I was right. Her green eyes were as cold as ice on a go-light.

"Care to try that again, s h a m u s ?" she inquired, throatily.

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I pushed her away while I still had my strength left. I turned back to Mikey. I could tell he hadn't liked my little byplay with his girl friend, but he hadn't got where he was in the rackets without learning some self-control—I'll give him that. He took his hand out of his desk drawer, closed the desk drawer and gave me that same mechanical smile.

"I don't think I know your friend," he said.

"Client, Mikey, client," I answered. "We got a little something to talk over with you. How about some privacy?"

Not a muscle in his face twitched. He flicked his hand at the door.

"Beat it," he growled.

The blonde pouted, but undulated out. The two characters hesitated. But they wouldn't have been Mikey's boys unless they'd learned some self control. They took their hands out from under their left armpits and went out.

"Well, shamus?" said Mikey, turning to me as the door slammed.

"Well, it's like this," began Dobuk, behind me. "We're looking for—"

"Can it!" I growled. I perched on Mikey's desk myself and helped myself to a cigar from his humidor and a stiff slug from a decanter that stood handy on the desk top.

"I thought you had this town organized, Mickey."

"Who says I haven't?" he retorted.

"Nobody said it yet," I told him. "What if I told you there's rumors of a freelance character running around with a forty-five?"

"There's no free guns in this town, Hall. If there is, I'll have the boys take care of him. What's he look like?"

"About eight inches long," I said. "Two and a half ounces, green with purple patches and about two feet across the wings."

He was writing the particulars down on a note pad.

"Eight inches long—" he repeated and stopped suddenly, looking up at me. "Who you trying to kid, Hall?"

I reached over, grabbed him by the lapels and hauled him to me. He clanked a little coming across the desk and I reached in to grab what I figured was a gun in his inside pocket. I never made it. Before I could close my hand, the lights went out.

I came to lying on a couch. Raising my head, I saw a large room with dark wooden rafters overhead. I was in somebody's hunting lodge. Looking down, I saw a fireplace and the platinum blonde in something filmy curled up on a polar-bear skin in front of it.

"Where am I?" I said.

"In my hunting lodge," she

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answered, throatily. "Don't you like me on a polar-bear skin, shamus?"

I reached for a bottle of bourbon on an end table nearby and poured myself a healthy slug. It made me feel a little better. My head was killing me.

"Save the routine for Mikey," I growled.

"But I can't stand Mickey," she answered. "I want to run away from him. Oh, he buys me presents and things—like this hunting lodge. But I can't stand him." Suddenly she was up in a swirl of something filmy and had flung herself into my arms. "Oh, Jake, Jake," she sobbed, "you don't know what it's like, living the kind of life I lead."

Looking down at her platinum blonde head, I almost felt sorry for her. Poor kid, it was the old story, I thought. Miss Podunk Corners of nineteen sixty-three, a knockout at sixteen, chased by all the local punks, but with stars in her eyes. A beauty contest win, Hollywood, a contract as a starlet at two hundred a week—and then nothing. Nothing to do, week after week, but sit around drawing her two hundred and killing time. Never a part. In desperation, marriage—to a wealthy, handsome, older man, who, however, turned out to have no time for anything but his aircraft plant. Six weeks of this, and disillusionment. Reno, divorce, a modest hunk of alimony. Then—one day she had woken up to look in the mirror and see herself—twenty, no longer a kid.

In desperation, she had begun to live for kicks, started running with a tougher and tougher crowd. Finally, she had ended up with Mikey. Oh, I'd no doubt, he had attracted her at first, with his crude, unsophisticated ways; and then it had begun to dawn on her that she was trapped.

It was the sort of thing I saw all the time in my business. But that was neither here nor there. I was here, and where was Dobuk?

"Where's the guy that was with me?" I demanded.

She choked back her sobs. "He's out back," she said. We got up and went out. In a shed at the rear of the building we found a stack of hickory logs piled up like so much cordwood. On top was Dobuk, out cold.

I shook him out of it, got him moving and we all went back into the lodge.

"How'd they ever knock you out?" I asked him, when we were back inside. He shook his head.

"This is more serious than I thought," he said, shaking his head. "the only thing that could so affect a Peshniam Memnian like myself—"

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"A what?" said the blonde.

"A Psehniam—I am a Memnian from Pesh, Miss," said Dobuk. "I and Mr. Hall are in quest of a Jchoknian Sngrian, or a Sngrian from Jchok. I was pointing out that since I am a Memnian Peshnian, unlike a Zumnian Omnian, that is, an Omnian from Zumn a lighter gravity world to which one branch of our Memnian race has adapted—"

"Get to the point," I interrupted.

"Well," said Dobuk, "the point is that about the only thing on this planet which could render me unconscious would be a jolt of Emirnian nerve gas, one capsule of which Topla Pong was known to have in his posession after his encounter with the cruiser in the Coal Sack. I sadly fear that the Sngrian we are seeking has already joined forces with your Earthly underworld."

"Could be—" I said, frowning. I turned to the blonde.

"What's your name, baby?" I demanded.

"It's Sheila," she answered, shyly. "Sheila Coombes."

"I'll bet it is," I snapped. She colored.

"How did you guess?" she murmured. "The name of my husband in my first unhappy marriage was Swinebender, but after I got my divorce I took back my maiden name—only changing it a little from the original, which was Gumbs."

"I thought so," I said. "I been in the business too long to be fooled by a name like Coombes. Now listen, Sheila, baby. If you want help to get away from Mikey, now's your time to level with us. First, how'd we get here?"

Her lower lip trembled.

"Gorilla and Weasel brought you out," she said. "You were all tied up, but when they went back to town, I took a chance and untied you."

"What were they going to do with us here?"

"Keep you on ice, they said, until Mikey had time to figure out how to dispose of you. I was supposed to keep an eye on you. Mikey said he wanted Gorilla and Weasel back in town for something."

"Yeah?" I said. Things were beginning to make sense to me. "Got a radio anyplace around the dump, Sheila?"

"There's one in the bedroom," she said. We went into the bedroom. Between drapes of flaming pink, a Capehart stood under one window. On top of it was a small table model radio in black leather inlaid with brilliants. Sheila turned it on.

"Get the news," I told her.

She fiddled with the dial. We got music, sports, a lecture by a professor at UCLA, more music—but no news.

"It's no use," said Sheila.

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"No, wait," said Dobuk. "I believe I sense—"

The moaner sobbing his tune at us out of the loudspeaker got suddenly cut off in mid-howl. The dry-toast voice of an on-the-spot announcer came crackling out at us.

"—we interrupt this program to bring you a special announcement. It has just been learned that the governments of the world's leading nations have received a communication from some organization calling itself the Syndicate and believed in some circles to be the criminal ring behind much of the illegal activites in this country. The communication gives the world's law enforcement agencies twenty-four hours to, quote—get out of business—unquote. In the event that the law enforcement agencies do not comply within the stated time, the Syndicate announces its intention of dropping one atomic bomb each on every major city on the face of the globe. The letter is thought to be a hoax; and if this is so, the hoax will soon be exposed. For it has just been learned that although the news was just now released to the news agencies, the ultimatums were delivered yesterday and the deadline is less than four hours away. We now return to Tommy Mugwu—"

I switched off the set.

"Yesterday!" I said. "How long were we out?"

"Almost twenty hours," said Sheila. Dobuk turned pale.

"Sure it's a hoax," I said. "Where would they get atomic bombs?"

Dobuk turned paler.

"You don't know Sngrians," he said. "'Snfle beh jkt Sngrian' as "the native saying goes. Or, to translate roughly into English, 'Sngrians are all natural-born scientists'. Give Topla Pong a few pinches of middle to heavyweight elements and he can turn out atomic bombs like bjiks—or as you would say—hot rolls."

"But why would he want to blow up all the big cities?" cried Sheila. "That won't help the Syndicate, any."

"The Syndicate itself must be helpless in his grasp," said Dobuk. "Remember, he is not merely an ordinary criminal, but a criminal executive with the very best of up--to-date galactic methods of criminal organization at his antennaetips. To take over your Syndicate would be pupa's play to the Sngrian who once held undisputed sway over four systems before the IBCA broke his power."

"But the cities—"

"Ah, but there you are," said Dobuk. "He has no scruples. So he destroys the cities today. Slave labor will build them back up again for him tomorrow—and with new-

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er, bigger, better gambling houses and vice dens. No doubt he plans something like criminal conscription where every adult will be forced into some sort of criminal activity, no matter how minor. Ordinary values mean nothing to him. Remember he is a creature of great natural genius and tremendous talent which he gets his greatest happiness from utilising. To him there is something creative and artistic about building a criminal empire. He does it not for the material, but for the spiritual rewards."

"Dress it up in fancy clothes if you want," I said. "To me, he's still nothing more than a two-bit butterfly with delusions of grandeur. I've met the biggest of them; and when the chips are down they're all punks who think they can make it the easy way."

"No, no," said Dobuk, earnestly, "you don't understand."

"I understand all right," I told him. I reached for my shoulder holster. It was empty. "They took my gun," I said. I turned on Sheila. "Got a gun around the house, baby?"

"Well, let me see—" she frowned and thought. "I have a twenty-five automatic and a ladies purse model twenty-two. But they're both out being fixed. I know, I've got a little .12 caliber automatic. Will that do?"

"It'll have to," I growled.

"Not a toy," she said. "built in imitation of one of Germany's most famous firearms. Not an air or a CO2 gun, this is a small-bore gun that actually shoots a clip of six .12 caliber lead bullets." She extracted it from the center drawer of her dressing table and handed it to me. "Excellent for small game, target work, and scaring prowlers."

I picked the twelve up between two fingers and dropped it carefully into my shoulder holster. I felt more natural with a gun on me.

"What are you going to do?" asked Dobuk.

"Time's running short," I grated. "There's only one thing to do. Go to Mikey's town house and get to the bottom of things."

Sheila turned pale.

"The Syndicate West Coast Headquarters?" she cried. "Oh, no, no! I won't let you, Jake. They'll kill you. An army couldn't get into that place."

I shrugged.

"Who's using the army?" I said.

"Then I'll go with you," cried Sheila.

"And I, of course, also," said Dobuk.

We went out and hopped into Sheila's gold and black Cad convertible and lit out for L.A. I was behind the wheel and I kept the needle crowding a hundred and ten all the way in. It was tense

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driving, especially through the business districts along the way.

We made it in three hours. It had been about five o'clock when we left the lodge; and night had fallen, by the time I skidded to a stop at the rear of the estate grounds of Mikey's town residence. I witched off the lights and sat for a minute listening to see if our approach had been noticed. But everything was quiet inside the high stone fence with the broken bottles set in concrete on the top and the electric wire running above them. Through the dark stillness, we could hear the mutters of the hoods on the front gate changing guard, and see the white ghost of the searchlight on top of the mansion sweeping the grounds.

"Perhaps," suggested Dobuk, "Perhaps we should inform the local law enforcement agency of our mission?"

"In this suburb of L.A.?" I said. "Don't make me laugh. "Mikey's always been careful to play the good, solid home owner in this neighborhood. He gives to the charities and sits on the local committees. They're sold on him. The local law would laugh in our faces."

I got out of the car. Dobuk got out on the other side.

"I'm coming with you!" cried Sheila.

"No," I said.

"Yes!"

"No."

"Yes!"

I hated to have to do it. But I slugged her. Glass jaw—she went out like a light.

"All right," I said to Dobuk. "Now, follow me."

"Where?" inquired Dobuk.

"Over the wall," I said.

"Why not through?" he asked; and walked through the wall. He made a fair-sized hole. I followed.

But the noise of the smashing wall had alarmed the mansion. From the front gate came startled cries; and the searchlight stopped roaming about at random and began a personal hunt in our area of the grounds. I ducked behind some fir trees, dragging Dobuk with me. He was shaking like a leaf.

"What's wrong?" I snapped.

"Oh, these violent emotions!" he groaned. "The place quivers with them. Pesh, why did I ever leave you? I am impaled living on darting shafts of fear and hatred."

"Snap out of it!" I whispered. "If you can't take it from these hoods, how'll you be able to stand up to The Butterfly?"

"He's nowhere near so savage," said Dobuk. "Evil, yes—but as violent, no. You humans!"

I looked at him in the sudden glare of the searchlight that flickered over us without stopping. He was a sad

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sight. These amateurs are never any good.

"Here, take a jolt of this," I said, handing him the pint I always carry in my hip pocket.

His trembling hand took it and there was a splintering, crunching sound.

"Hey! You nuts?" I yelped in a loud whisper. He had just chewed the neck off the bottle and was about to take a bite out of the rest of it. "You drink it, you don't eat it."

"I'm sorry," he said, humbly, "a little bit of silicon is good for my nerves."

"To hell with your nerves," I said. "I need something to carry my whisky in." I grabbed the bottle back. It was already ruined. "Oh, well," I said; and drank it off. My head was killing me anyway. I handed the bottle back to Dobuk. "Here, finish it off."

"Thank you," he said. There was a little more crunching, a quiet gulp, and we were ready to roll.

We headed for the dim outline of the house, running bent over double. We came up against the back of the building. There was a basement window. Rapidly, I crisscrossed it with scotch tape and broke it open with the butt of the twelve. I reached in, unlatched it, opened it, and we crawled in.

The basement was dark and silent. Suddenly the lights went on.

"Who's there?" snarled a voice; and a rough-looking character came g a l l o p i n g down the stairs. I let him have it between the eyes with the twelve.

"Pick up his body," I said to Dobuk. "Stack it out of sight behind the furnace."

"Whuzzat?" he said. His eyes were glazed. All of a sudden it hit me. He was drunk as a skunk. I should never have let him have the rest of that bottle.

I backhanded him a couple of times across the face, bruising my knuckles.

"Snap out of it," I growled.

He whimpered and cringed away from me.

"If there's anything I hate," I snarled. "It's a lush. Particularly during b u s i n e s s hours."

"Don't," he w h i m p e r e d. "Don't hate me. I'll be all right."

He looked so bad, I relented.

"Okay, come on then," I said. He followed me upstairs.

In the kitchen were five more hoods playing Hollywood gin at five cents a point. I let them all have it between the eyes. The little twelve was empty. I chcked the shoulder holsters of the hoods. They were all carrying thirty-twos. I took one.

"Come on," I said to Dobuk. We moved out through the kitchen door. As I stepped through, I had a glimpse of someone swing-

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ing at me. I ducked, but not quickly enough. For a moment the room went black; and then I had staggered to my feet and let the man who tried to slug me have it between the eyes. He was dressed in a monkey suit; and for a second I didn't get it. Then I realised he must be the butler.

On the dining table was a tray he had evidently been carrying upstairs when he heard me. It held a bottle, ice, and glasses. I poured myself a stiff shot and downed it. My head was killing me.

I searched the butler. He was carrying a thirty-eight and I traded my thirty-two for it. While I was doing this, someone shot at us from the living room, but missed because I was bent over; and the bullet hit nobody but Dobuk, who, of course, it didn't hurt.

"There's someone in the living room," said Dobuk, looking down at the flattened slug where it lay on the chartreuse carpet before him.

"I know," I said.

I sprayed the living room with bullets and we advanced. Inside, Gorilla and Weasel lay dead with bullet holes between the eyes. Gorilla had my forty-five clutched in his ham-like mitt. Here, at last, was proof positive of the hookup between Pokla Tong and the Syndicate. I pointed this out to Dobuk. He agreed.

I led the way on up the stairs toward the second floor, the forty-five clutched in my hand. It felt good to have it back again, though I noticed Gorilla hadn't been taking good care of it. There was dried blood on the front sight at least twenty-four hours old.

At the top of the stairs, we entered a wide hallway. On the plum-colored carpet lay Sheila, her platinum blonde hair tumbled back from her pale face and a spreading stain on the front of her dress. She was dying.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. "I thought I left you in the car."

"You did—" she gasped. "I went to the front gate after I came to and one of the hoods on duty there brought me in to Mikey. I was going to double-cross you, but when I looked at him and thought of you I couldn't do it. He shot me." She choked suddenly on a rush of blood. "Kiss me once more, Jake."

I crushed her in my arms. It was like drowning in a sea of black flame for the last time. Halfway through the clinch, the flame flickered and went out. Gently, I laid her down on the plum-colored carpet. Her eyes were already closed in death, her face peaceful. She looked like a little girl again—a wayward kid, who at the last minute had found a spark of unexpected decency in her-

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self—a spark that had cost her her life.

Now I was really mad. Dobuk yelped and backed off from me.

"What's the matter with you?" I growled.

"You burnt me," he said. Then I got it. I was in a red hot rage after seeing Sheila, and the poor guy had been standing too close.

"Keep behind me," I said. Sheila's outstretched hand on the carpet seemed to be pointing toward a closed door at the end of the hall. I had a hunch that what Dobuk and I were both looking for would be behind the door. I headed for it, gun in hand.

I kicked the door open. It was a library; and behind a desk stood Mikey, faultlessly attired in evening clothes, a highball in one hand and a gun in the other. He gave me a mechanical smile.

"Drop the rod, Mikey," I said. "I got you covered."

"Nuts," he said, oilily, "drop yours, Jake. I got you covered."

Without lowering my forty-five, I glanced at the gun in his hand. It was true. He was holding a forty-eight. I was outgunned.

Helplessly, I dropped the forty-five on the maroon carpet. Moving with piston-like efficiency, he stalked around the desk and scooped it up.

"Come in and shut the door," he said. "You too, Dobuk."

Dobuk! I had forgotten him. Dobuk was immune to bullets.

"Grab the gun from him, Dobuk!" I yelled.

Dobuk stepped around me and advanced on Mikey. Mikey flashed his vicious, mechanical smile at him.

"I've got the solution to you," he said. "To coin a phrase—'bye, bye, Dobuk!'"

His hand flashed out with piston-like efficiency and ripped Dobuk's belt from his pants. There was a splintering crash and Dobuk disappeared. A gaping hole marred the carpet where he had stood a minute before. Suddenly deprived of his gravity nullifier, Dobuk had reverted to his normal weight of two tons and dropped through two floors down into the basement.

"And now," said Mikey, pointing the forty-eight at me. "For you."

"Hold it!" I said, sharply. "I can see I'm not going to get out of this alive, so you better tell me how you did it."

"Very well," said Mikey. I could almost see the gears grinding in his head as he mulled over various plans for disposing of me. "Sheila was actually a third cousin of my aunt-by-marriage. Although she did not know it herself, she stood to inherit a large share of Syndicate voting stock, following my aun'ts recent death. I was

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planning to maneuver for a position on the Syndicate Executive board and needed her stock. The killing of Weasel was actually an accident. I was cleaning that forty-five of yours when it went off of ifs own accord, letting him have it between the eyes. I realised then that it was not safe to have a gun trained by you around the house. I handed it over to Gorilla without even finishing the job of taking the dried blood off the front sight...."

So that was why the dried blood was still on the front sight. Even the little things checked now. If only I'd put two and two together earlier.

"....and told Gorilla to take it and Weasel out and bury them. You must have run into them as Gorilla was carrying them out of the living room front door."

That explained why there had been only one shot from the living room—and why the bullet had missed me, only bruising Dobuk slightly between the eyes.

"The rest of it," wound up Mikey, "you know. With Sheila's stock and the know-how of The Butterfly, I saw my way clear to take over the Syndicate Executive Board."

"Where's Topla Pong now?" I demanded.

His eyes had a hard, metallic glint in them.

"Where you'll never find him," he said. He lifted his gun and aimed it at me. The hole in the muzzle looked as big enough to crawl into. "And now, to coin a phrase—"

"But *I* will find him!" announced Dobuk suddenly, rising up through the hole in the floor beneath us.

"Dobuk!" I yelled. "But how—? Your gravity nullifier—"

"Though only a plagiarism agent," he replied, "I have had the basic IBCA training. I built a new gravity nullifier out of parts from the thermostat on the basement furnace. And now," he said, turning toward Mikey, "to wind up the case."

"Then you know where Topla Pong is?" I asked.

"Exactly!" replied Dobuk, Striding across the carpet, he picked up Mikey and unscrewed his head. Reaching down inside Mikey's body, he hauled out by one wing the struggling green and purple figure of Topla Pong. The headless body of Mikey dropped to the carpet with a thump. Now I saw why his smiles and so many of his actions had been so mechanical.

"A robot!" I said.

"Exactly," repeated Dobuk. "Controlled from inside by Topla Pong, whom I will now return to interstellar justice."

"No, you won't!" shouted The Butterfly, speaking up now for the first time. I've done nothing on this planet that the real Mikey wouldn't

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have done. In my proper person I have committed no crimes. I claim sanctuary on this planet in accordance with Interstellar Law; and there are no courts here in which you can bring a case for extra-planetary extradition."

Dobuk looked stunned. He turned to me in consternation.

"Is this true?" he asked. "Has he actually done no more than the real Mikey would have done?"

"I hate to say yes," I said. "But it's a fact."

Topla Pong began to laugh wickedly.

"Then—then I'm helpless," said Dobuk, his shoulders dropping. "I felt sure he would have committed at least one crime here in his proper person."

"But he has!" I shouted. "What about Mikey, himself? He had to get rid of Mikey before he could pose as Mikey."

"True!" cried Dobuk. He turned to Topla Pong. "Where's Mikey?"

"Dissolved," retorted Topla Pong. "'Snfle beh jkt Sngrian' as the old saying goes, or in English—'All Sngrians are natural born scientists'. I dissolved him in acid and evaporated the acid. You'll never get me on that. As I need hardly point out—no corpus delecti."

"That does it," groaned Dobuk.

"No, no, wait—" I said. "We're forgetting the one crime he did that there's a living witness to. Right after he got here, he slugged me and stole my forty-five."

"My word against yours," smirked Topla Pong.

"I—I'm afraid—"stammered Dobuk.

"What?" I shouted. "You don't mean you aren't going to get him on that?"

"Well—after all—" fumbled Dobuk. "There were no other witnesses—were there?"

"But you came in and found me unconscious, yourself."

"Oh, yes," said Dobuk. "But consider the business you're in. Almost anybody is liable to knock you unconscious. Perhaps it was another would-be client. Inference is not evidence, you know. Short of an out and out confession—"

"Do you mean," I demanded, "that this butterfly is going to be turned loose to build more criminal empires, to conscript more honest citizens into the ranks of the underworld, to start anew his career of blood and dope-soaked organising?"

"Yes."

"We'll see about that!" I snapped. There was a newspaper lying on the desk. I rolled it up and slammed Topla Pong with it.

"Help!" he shouted. "Dobuk, help!"

"Jake—no!" cried Dobuk.

"Stay out of this," I snarled. "Stand back before I hate you."

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"No, no, not that—" said Dobuk. "I—I'll go outside. I can't stand this."

He turned and staggered out of the room. I swatted Topla Pong again.

"Confess!" I snarled.

I gritted my teeth and steeled myself. My stomach was going queasy on me for a minute I thought I couldn't go through with it. Then I thought of what this insect had done to Sheila and knew I could. Luckily, there was something that made it easier for me. I hate bugs.

I continued. Within a few seconds, Topla Pong broke.

"Stop it!" he yelled. "I'll confess. Get Dobuk back in here." I went out in the hall and got Dobuk, who was shaking like a leaf.

"He broke," I said, bringing him back into the room.

"So I see," said Dobuk. "Luckily I have my first aid kit here with me. I'll fix you up, Pong. There! That was a bad break."

"It sure was. Thanks," said The Butterfly. "Naturally, I put on a complete nerve block when this human started batting me around; but this is my second best body and I'd hate to have a lot of regrowth scars. I confess."

"In that case I hereby put you under hypnotic compulsion to return to Sngr and go on trial for your interstellar crimes."

"I go," said Topla Pong; and flew out a window.

Dobuk turned to me.

"You will, of course," he said, "submit a full report of this in writing?"

"Count on me," I said. "There's just one thing, though. What was it tipped you off to the fact that Mikey was really a robot with Topla Pong inside?"

"I'll tell you," said Dobuk. "Like every master criminal, it was the fact that he could not resist the commission of one minor crime that tripped him up. Before depriving me of my nullifier belt he spoke the words—*to coin a phrase—bye, bye, Dobuk.* He forgot that I am essentially a Plagiarism Expert; and as such I immediately recognised his words for the Interstellar Misdemeanor (non-extraditable) that they were. The original of that phrase, which could not conceivably be known to a human like Mikey, is found in A TOUCH OF WELIGIAN POISON by A. Zzanzr Lllg, protected by total Interstellar copyright, covering all known verbal and non-verbal reproductions in all languages, including thought — copyright number 82743906645382—569. It is found on spool thirty, eight hundred and forty-three syllables from the end and goes, correctly—*to coin a phrase—bye, bye, Ugluck!*"

"I get it," I said.

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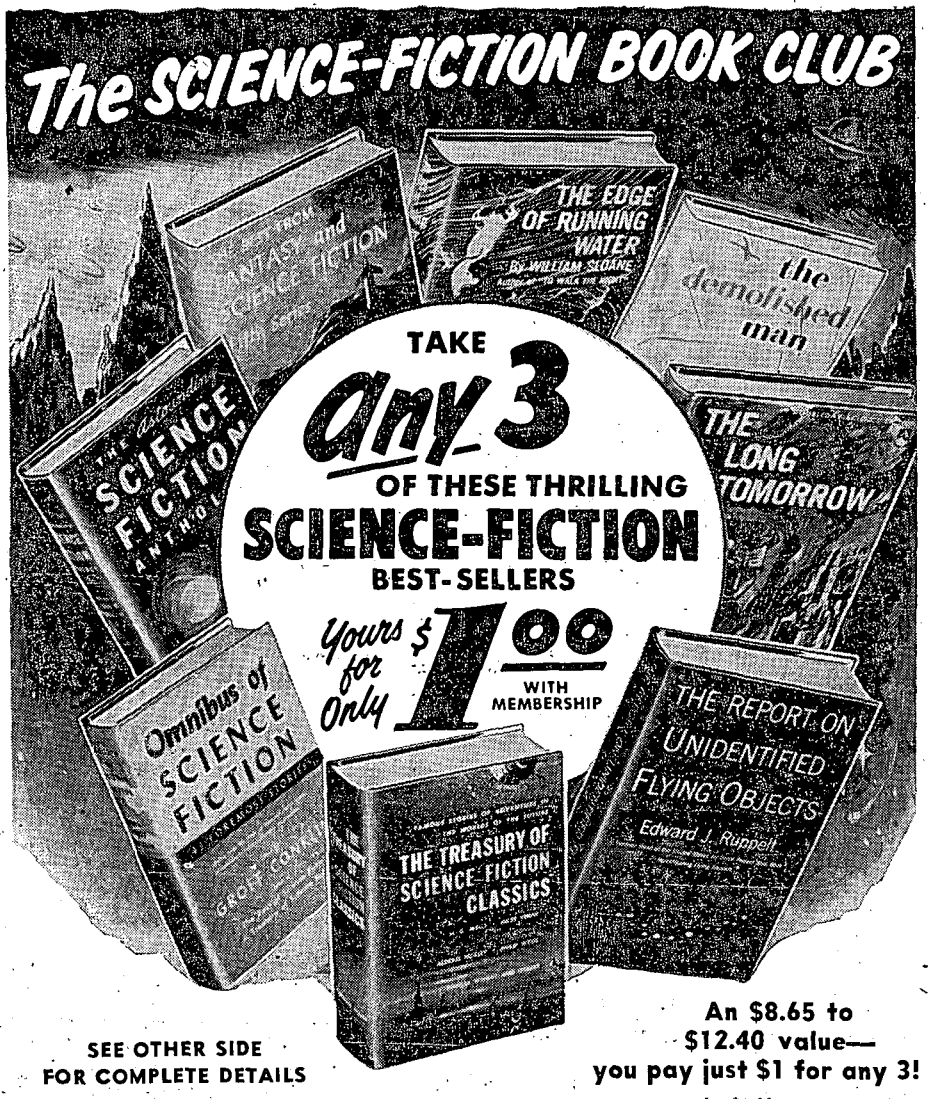


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